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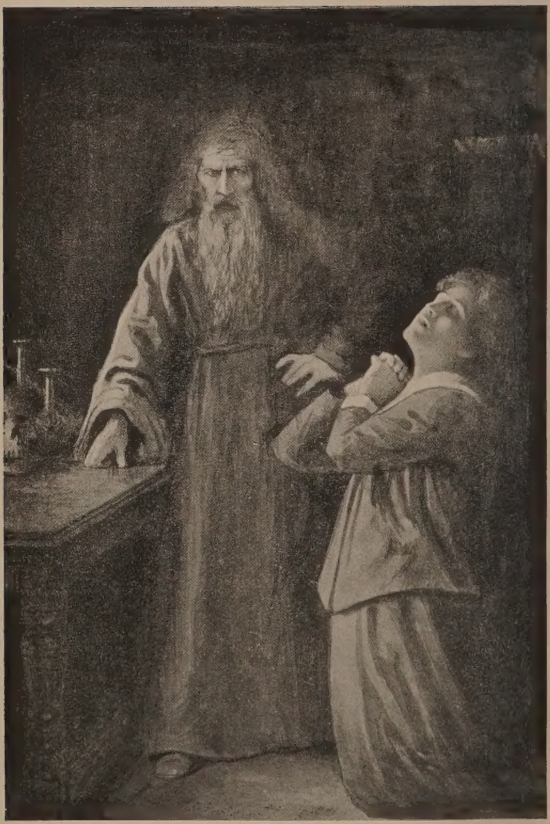

"I saw that the girl had fallen on her knees."
(Chapter VI.)

THE COMING OF THE KING

BY

JOSEPH HOCKING

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THE COMING OF THE KING

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF KATHARINE HARCOMB

THE history which I propose writing will, I believe, be of value for various reasons It will clear my name from various aspersions, and it will enable me to explain what, to many, seem events of an extraordinary nature. For I have done nothing which makes me fear the light, neither have I any desire to offer excuses for the actions which shall be here set down. What I have done I have done in good faith, knowing all the time of the probable results which would follow.

Moreover, I think it is well that many of the happenings of the time of which I write should be recorded, for surely the days of my youth were strange days, full of intrigue, full of mystery; and more, they were days in which one of the greatest battles ever known in our country was fought, a battle which had momentous issues in the life of our people.

I had a peculiar training even for youths of that period. For from the time of Archbishop Laud to the coming of King Charles II, nearly every family of note took sides in the great struggle through which the nation passed. Either a man was a Royalist or a Parliamentarian, a believer in the supreme and unquestionable rights of the king, or a supporter of the new order of things. There seemed no halfway house wherein a man might rest. Thus the nation was divided into two great camps, and if one was not in one of these camps he was in the other. But I was trained to hold myself aloof from both, and to distrust them equally.

The reason for this can be quickly told. During the

great struggle between Cromwell and the king, my father fought against the Ironside General. Indeed, he gave of his substance freely. He impoverished himself to replenish the king's coffers, and he armed his family retainers in order to keep him on the throne. In the early days of the war, moreover, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the king, and trusted in his royal words implicitly. But after the Battle of Naseby, when the king's papers were taken, and it was made known that Charles had deceived on every hand, my father lost faith in him, and declared he would never trust a king's word again. Not that he threw in his lot with Cromwell, thus following the example of many others. Rather he cut himself adrift from public affairs, and sought to live in seclusion.

But here a difficulty faced him. His resources were much diminished by what he had devoted to the king's cause, and added to this, so much of his property was taken from him in the troublous days which followed, that while he still kept the old home near Epping Forest, he was scarce able to maintain it. He was a country gentleman, bearing an old name, who could barely afford to keep the horse he rode, or the servants who waited at his tables. This (for my father was a very proud man) embittered him much, and caused him to lose faith in friend and foe alike. He despised the king who had deceived both his followers and those who fought against him, and he spoke of the Presbyterians and Independents as a crack-brained and sour-faced crew, who would make the country a place unfit for a gentleman to live in.

"I trust neither of them, my son," he would often say to me. "I gave my blood and my fortune to the king, and he deceived me by lying promises and false statements: as for this Puritan crew, they have robbed me of my possessions until I, who at the time of the Short Parliament was a rich man, have not the means of giving my only son either a good horse to ride, or money to put in his purse."

"I will gain both, father," I said, for in those days I was ardent and hopeful, believing that everything was possible to a brave heart and a strong arm.

"But how?" cried my father. "The king's cause is

dead, even if it would have benefited thee by fighting for it. As for these canting Puritans, no man can gain aught from them, unless he will quote Scripture, and cry 'Down with the Prayer-book.' In truth there is no cause which an honourable man can espouse, and thus carve his way to fortune."

"The opportunity will come some day," I replied confidently.

My father shook his head. "It cannot be," he said. "England is governed by canting hypocrites, and there is not a man in the country whom we can trust. I tell thee Roland, I am sorely grieved for thee. I have no fortune to give thee, neither are there means whereby a man bearing the name of Rashcliffe can honourably win one. Marriage seems impossible. Not one maid do I know, who would wed a penniless lad like thee; by that I mean a maid of family and dowry. I am known among men as penniless Rashcliffe, and such a name makes it impossible for my son to make a suitable marriage."

"But surely there must be means whereby a man may carve his way to fortune?"

"Tell me about them, Roland. Where can we find them? Those who, like I, have been foolish enough to trust the king and fight for his cause are left wellnigh penniless and friendless. We have been deceived, tricked as if by a cunning card-player. I tell you there is no honour among kings. As for the Puritans, could you play the knave in order to gain their favour? Could you mimic their pious whine, and curse both bishops and Prayer-book?"

"No, I could not," I replied, for although my father had taught me to have no faith in men, he still tried to teach me to be an honourable gentleman.

"I know," he went on, "that many hope for the death of Cromwell. Well, that may happen any day, and then what shall we see? In all probability Oliver will make provision whereby his son shall take his place. But even if he doth not, and Charles were to come back, would such as I be benefited? Would the new king see to it that my estates were restored to me? The new King Charles would be the son of the old King Charles. The new king

would be a Stuart, and never again can I trust a Stuart."

Presently Oliver Cromwell died, and I thought my father seemed to be possessed of new hope; but when Richard, his son, was chosen Lord Protector in his place, he simply shrugged his shoulders like a Frenchman, and said that the country was not yet tired of psalm-singing. During the months that followed he went often to London, in order, as he said, to find out what Monk and Lambert were doing, and when at length Richard Cromwell ceased to be Lord Protector, he grimly remarked that we "should soon see gay doings."

"A little later the whole country was in a state of excitement. Charles was recalled to England, the Royalists were jubilant, while the Puritans looked forward with dread to the dark days which they felt sure were near at hand.

"We will go to meet the King," cried my father.

"What!" I cried in astonishment, for my father had declared that he would never again have aught to do with a Stuart.

"Ay, we will go and meet him, Roland. You and I will ride together. There are still two good horses left in the stables, and we will dress ourselves in a way befitting gentlemen, and we will go to Dover, and shout 'God save the King!' with the rest of the crowd."

"But why?" I asked, for I felt no love for the man whom the people were already calling "His Gracious Majesty King Charles II, the Lord's Anointed One."

"Ay, and that you shall know before the sun goes down," he replied.

I looked at him in astonishment, for he had cast off the old look of hopelessness and indifference so common to him, and seemed to believe that brighter days were coming.

"Do you believe in the new king?" I asked.

"I believe a Stuart!" he replied, with scorn. "Nay, not so my son."

"Men speak of him as a man with an open and generous nature," I suggested.

"Ay, and I knew him before he had to fly from the country," he replied. "I tell you he is a Stuart. He hath the vices of both his father and his grandfather. He will lie and deceive like Charles his father, and he will

turn his Court into a pigsty, like his grandfather James. In six months from now Whitehall will be filled with swashbucklers and wine-bibbers. Bad men and worse women will rule the country. God only knows what will become of the Puritans, in spite of his fair promises. But what of that? We will go and meet him!"

"But you will gain nought."

"Ay, I will, but there will be much to do first."

"Much to do!"

"Ay, much for thee to do, Roland. I have hopes that the Rashcliffe lands will be mine again, and that my son will hold up his head among the highest."

"You think you will gain the favour of the king?"

"Nay, but perchance I may gain his fear."

"His fear?"

"Ay, his fear. Or, better still, thou shalt gain his fear."

"But why should the king fear me? I can do nought against him. I have no power."

"Knowledge is power," replied my father.

"But I have no knowledge."

"Nay, but thou shalt be in the way to get it before the sun goes down."

At this I made no reply, but I looked at him in astonishment.

"I do not speak wildly or foolishly," said my father. "I tell thee again thou shalt know something of importance before the sun goes down. And now get on the back of that colt Black Ben, which hath been lately broken to the saddle, and ride him across the park lands yet left to us. Get accustomed to his step, my boy, for when we meet the king, it is my desire that King Charles may take note what a fine horseman you are."

I went to the stables, therefore, and saddled Black Ben, a colt which had been a kind of playmate to me, and which had required very little breaking in order to allow me to ride him. For however he might treat another rider, to me he was gentleness itself. I was proud of Black Ben, for he was the finest horse I ever possessed, on which the neighbours cast eyes of envy. Indeed, my father had been offered a good price for him, but although he wanted the money sadly he refused to sell it.

"No," he said. "thou hast a horse at last, Roland, and thou shalt keep it. I will sell some milch cows before Black Ben shall go."

He was a large noble animal, as black as the wing of a raven, and free from spot or blemish of any sort. I had never tested his speed, but I knew that there was not a horse between me and London town that I could not pass if I gave Black Ben rein.

He gave me a whinny as he saw me, and presently rubbed his nose against my sleeve by way of greeting.

"You are going to meet the new king, Black Ben, my boy," I said as I patted him, and again he whinnied as though he understood me.

A few minutes later I was flying across the park on Ben's back. I was at this time nearly twenty-three years of age, and having taken after my father, was not a light man, but he bore me as though I were a feather.

When I reached the park gates I saw old Adam Winkley, who still lived at the cottage and called himself the gate-keeper, although there was no need of his services.

"Ah, Mester Roland," he said as I came up, "I do 'ear as 'ow the new king is comin'."

"Ay, so it is said."

"Well, God bless the king! I be always a king's man, I be. I be noan for Old Nol's crew. Not but what they can fight. Give Old Nol his due, he've made the furriners see that the English caan't be bait."

"We didn't need Old Nol to make them know that," I replied.

"Well, as to that, Mester Roland, forgive me for not havin' the same opinion as you; but I fought in the wars with your father, and I shall go lame to the end of my days because of it, and I know somethin' of fightin'. This I knaw, the furriners never feared the English so much as they did durin' Old Nol's time. Not that I believed in him. I bean't a young man, but I still like a carouse I do, and I like good ale, and plenty of it, and I say let people enjoy themselves. And I reckon we shall see a change soon. When young Charles do come, we shall no longer have these sour-faced Independents rulin' the roost, and so I say with a full heart, God bless King Charles."

I let the old man talk in this way for old time's sake. He had served our family all his life, and although others had left during our fallen fortunes, he had remained faithful.

"And when do the king come, Mester Roland?"

"Next Tuesday, I have heard, but I am not quite sure."

"Then I shall start to walk to Dover town on Monday morning, so as to be in time to see him land."

"Ah, then I shall see you there. Both my father and I are going."

"I be right glad. I be in hopes that the new king will do your father justice, Master Roland, and that we shall see gay doings at Rashcliffe again. God save the king, I say."

At this moment my attention was drawn from old Adam by a woman who was walking towards my father's house. As far as I could judge she was somewhat advanced in years, although she walked with a strong sturdy step. She gave a hasty glance in my direction, and then kept her face steadily towards the house.

"Know you who that is?" I asked of Adam.

"No!" replied old Adam; "it can't be she?"

"Can't be who?"

"Can't be Katharine Harcomb; and yet she has her walk. But Katharine is dead. I've heard it many a time." This he said as though he were talking to himself rather than to me.

"But who is Katharine Harcomb? I never heard her name."

"No, she left Rashcliffe before you were born, and yet she was maid to your mother. She was a gay one, was Katharine. What Katharine didn't know wasn't worth finding out. Ay, and a handsome maid she was too. As for darin', there was nothing she wouldn't do. One day she dressed in your mother's fine clothes, and the other servants didn't know her, she looked such a grand lady. They all curtsied to her, thinking she was some visitor who had come unbeknowing to them. Ay, Katharine could act the lady, she could. Why, it is said the young king fell in love with her when he was Prince Charles, but of that I'll say nothing. Still, this woman can't be she, although she's got her look and her walk. Katharine died years ago—there can be no doubt about that."

By this time the woman was out of sight, while I turned my horse's face towards London, and rode a few miles in that direction before returning to the house.

It was drawing towards evening when I got back, and on entering the house I found that my father had given orders that he should be informed of my return.

"Roland," he said when at length I went to him, "will you come with me into the library?"

"Yes," I said, wondering at his grave demeanour.

When I entered the library I almost gave a start, for in the room was the woman I had seen in the park. She looked up at me, and there was, as I thought, a bold and defiant expression in her eyes. She did not look like a woman of birth and breeding, and yet no one would regard her as a common serving woman. She possessed an air approaching gentility, and although her clothes were much worn, they were of good material.

"More mother than father," I heard her say.

I looked at her awkwardly, for I knew not how to address her, and although I lifted my hat and bowed as I would to a lady of my own degree, I did so constrainedly, not feeling comfortable in her presence.

"This is Mistress Katharine Harcomb," said my father. "She dwelt here before you were born."

The woman gave a laugh, which was half-defiant, half amused.

"Ay, I dwelt here before you were born, Master Roland; since then I have been dead, and now I am alive again."

I did not like the woman. Not that she was evil-looking; rather, she must have been very fair to look upon twenty years before, and even now she retained much of the beauty of youth. But her voice was harsh, the lines around her mouth suggested scorn and bitterness, while the strong chin should have belonged to a man rather than to a woman. I could see in a moment that she was not a woman to be trifled with; indeed, she evidently possessed that imperious strength of will like unto that by which Queen Elizabeth made strong men quail before her.

"I pray you to pay good heed to what Mistress Harcomb hath to tell us," said my father, "for it is no light matter concerning which she would speak."

I know not why, but my heart became heavy. I felt sure that the knowledge which my father had spoken of as power to bend the will of kings was somehow associated with this strong imperious looking woman who gazed steadily into my eyes.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET OF THE BLACK BOX

I MUST confess to a somewhat strange feeling in my heart when I looked into the woman's face. I felt sure that she was trying to understand the manner of man I was, so that she might make up her mind how far I could be of service to her. For, from the very first I could not think of her as a former serving woman of my mother. Humble of birth she might be, but I was very sure that her thoughts were other than those of a serving woman, and that she had mixed herself up with affairs of importance. Her great dark searching eyes, her strongly moulded face, her determined mouth all assured me that here was a woman of far-reaching plans, and one who would stop at nothing to carry those plans into effect.

"More mother than father," I heard her murmur again, and then she looked from my father to me as though she were trying to discover the difference between us.

"Well, Katharine," said my father, "you have discovered what you set your heart upon, and which you spoke of when I saw you in St. Paul's Church."

The woman laughed mockingly.

"In less than a month the king will be in England," she said, "and, oh! what a king!" and then she fell to scanning our faces again.

"The people be already crying, 'God save the king!'" said my father. "Already my old neighbours who fought for Charles I be looking forward to the time when the Puritans will be despoiled like the Egyptians of old, and when they will be rewarded for being faithful to the royalty."

"Rewarded!" said the woman scornfully. "Will the eldest son of Charles I ever reward an honest man? I know him, Master Rashcliffe. He will be the dupe of every knave, the puppet of every hussy in England. He will

make promises without end, but he will be too idle to perform them. No honest man will be the better for his return, and no one will have justice unless that justice is forced from him."

"But have you discovered aught?" asked my father. "You know what you promised me. Moreover, when I last saw the dame with whom you had lodgment at the back of Aldersgate Street, she said you had your hand upon the proof."

"And I am not one who makes promises lightly," replied the woman, "neither am I a woman who, having made up her mind, is easily turned aside. Nevertheless, there remaineth much to be done, Master Rashcliffe. The matter is not child's play, and he who meddles with matters which affect the king is in danger of being accused of treason. For Charles Stuart can act to purpose when it suits him. That is why I have not come to you before."

Here again the woman ceased speaking and scanned me closely.

"This son of yours hath never fought in the wars?" she said questioningly.

"Nay," replied my father. "During the first civil war he was too young to bear arms. After that my heart was embittered. I would not have my son uphold the claims of a man who was alike faithless to both enemies and friends. Then, when Charles was beheaded, could I allow my son to fight under Cromwell?"

"He was a brave, strong man," replied the woman.

"Ay, a brave strong man if you will. But not such a man as my son could fight under. Besides, I would not have him mingle with such a crew as this army fashioned under the New Model. Would I have my son become a psalm-singing hypocrite? Would I have him taught to cry 'down with the Prayer Book'? Would I have him made a sour-faced follower of old Noll, learning to make pious speeches in order to gain promotion? No, I had fought under the king's standard, and, although the king betrayed us all, I would not have my son serve under my Lord Protector. Nevertheless, Roland is no weakling, as you see, neither is he a fool. Poor as I have been, I have seen to it that he hath learned something of letters. He can

write like a clerk, and can read not only in the English tongue, but in Latin and in French."

"In French?" said the woman eagerly, I thought.

"Ay, in French. Besides without ever having served with the wars, he knows everything of fighting that I could tell him, and as for swordcraft, I doubt if there is a man in London town who could stand against him."

Again the woman looked at me eagerly, and then she broke out like one in anger.

"It is well, Master Rashcliffe, for, mark you, if what I have discovered is true, he will need all his cleverness, all his learning, and all his knowledge of swordcraft. We play for high stakes, Master Rashcliffe—nothing less than the throne of England."

"Ay, I gathered as much," said my father thoughtfully.

"Look you here," went on the woman. "You desire to gain back your estates; you desire, moreover, that your son Roland shall not be a penniless, lackland squire like you. Why, I discovered as I came hither, that for years this manor house hath been little better than a farm kitchen, that such as Nicholas Beel, the blacksmith, who fought for Cromwell, and 'praise be his name, Elijah of the Marsh,' and 'Grace-abounding Reuben,' who used to be one of your hinds, be now fattening on your best farms."

"Ay, it is so," cried my father angrily. "The very kitchen wenches of twenty years ago laugh at me, and call me 'Landless Rashcliffe'."

"And Charles Stuart will never give you back these lands unless he is made," said the woman.

"Ay, ay," said my father, "I know enough of him for that; but to your tale, Katharine Harcomb. Tell me what you know."

"I know that James, the new king's brother, is full of hope that Charles will kill himself by revelry in a year," replied the woman. "I know that he is next heir to the throne. I know that he is intriguing to get back the Catholic religion to the country, and I know that neither Charles nor James loves either you or yours."

"And yet I fought for their father," said my father.

"Ay, and like the honest man thou art, declared that thou couldst never fight for him again after the contents

of his papers which were found on Naseby field were made known," retorted the woman. "I know this, too, that if Charles had gained the victory over Cromwell, thou wouldst have been beheaded for what thou didst say at that time. Mark you, a Stuart never forgets, and never forgives, for all the fair promises that they make. Therefore if ever thou dost get back thine own, and if ever thy son is to be more than a mere yeoman ploughing his own fields—ay, and poor fields at that, for the best have all been taken away—he must be able to force the new king's hand."

"Ay, I know all this," replied my father impatiently, "but let us hear what you have discovered, Katharine; let us know the truth concerning the strange things I have heard."

"It is no use telling of what I know, unless this son of thine be bold enough to make use of it," replied the woman. "I am a girl no longer, Master Rashcliffe; I am not so simple as I was in those days when I was waiting maid to Mistress Rashcliffe. Enough to say that I have found out sufficient to make Charles Stuart, who is even now preparing to come to England as king, eager not only to restore thy lands, but to give a place of honour to Master Roland here. Ay, but that is not all. The thing which I know to exist must be in our hands, ay, and in our hands in such a way that we shall be able to make our own bargain with the new king."

"But what is it?"

"It is this. James, Duke of York, is not the next heir to the throne."

"Well, and what of that?"

"This," replied the woman. "You have heard of th Welsh girl, Lucy Walters?"

"Ay, I have heard of her."

"And you have heard of her son, a lad who goes by the name of James Croft?"

"Yes," said my father, "I have heard of him; but doth not matter."

"Ay, but it doth matter."

"Why?"

"Because he, although Charles Stuart will doubtles deny it, is the next heir to the throne of England."

My father started back in amazement.

"He is Charles' son," continued the woman.

"Ay, but——"

"Charles married Lucy Walters—married her in Holland."

"But the proof, the proof!" cried my father.

"It is the proof of which I come to speak," said Katharine Harcomb. "But answer me this: suppose the proof could be obtained, suppose the box containing the contract of marriage between Charles Stuart and Lucy Walters could be obtained—what then?"

For a time my father was silent. Evidently he regarded the woman's declaration of great import, and I saw that he carefully considered her words.

"Charles would not desire it to be known," he said at length.

"Nay, that he would not," said the woman with a laugh; "but there is more than that, Master Rashcliffe."

"Ay, there is," said my father thoughtfully. "He who could be fortunate enough to possess that marriage contract would be able to make his terms not only with the king, but the king's brother."

"Ah, you begin to see."

"The man who possessed such a secret could stir up civil war in England," said my father; "such a war that might well make men forget the war between Charles I and Cromwell."

"Ay," said the woman; "but what is more to our purpose, Master Rashcliffe, he could make the king restore the Rashcliffe lands, and gain for his son a place in England worthy his name."

"And do others know of this secret, Katharine?" asked my father.

"Yes," replied the woman; "it hath been guessed at by many, but I alone know where the box containing the marriage contract is hidden. It hath cost me much trouble to find out, but at last I have done it."

I looked at the woman as she said this, and I thought there was a furtive look in her eyes.

"And how did you find it out?" asked my father presently.

"Of that more anon," replied Katharine Harcomb. "Enough to say now that this is the secret I promised to tell you, a secret which should give you the power to make your own terms with the king. All now depends on young Roland here."

"On me!" I cried, speaking for the first time, although, as may be imagined, I listened eagerly to every word which had been spoken.

"Ay, on you," replied the woman, "for that marriage contract is in hiding. It is hidden in a black box,[1] and may be obtained only with difficulty. The question is, Master Roland, will you undertake the work of bringing it hither?"

"How old is the king's son?" I cried, for her story had excited my imagination and appealed to that love for adventure which for a long time had been struggling for expression.

"How old?" repeated the woman; "he is a lad of about eleven years. At present he is with the dowager queen."

"And do you mean that he is the next heir to the English throne?" I cried.

"Ay, that he is," replied the woman; "and the man who can find the marriage contract can go far to be one of the masters of England."

"And if it be not brought to light?" I cried, "then if Charles has no other son, the Duke of York will become king."

"That is not the thing of import," replied the woman; "the thing that is of weight is this: the man who hath the secret can make the king obey him."

But this was not the thought which fired my imagination. A great overmastering desire came into my heart to place my hand upon this marriage contract that I might be the means of doing justice to the king's disowned son, and even as she spoke I found myself making plans for going

[1] As all students of history know, the story of the black box containing the marriage contract between Charles II and Lucy Walters obtained great credence after the Restoration; indeed, it is probable that belief in its validity had much to do with the Monmouth rebellion at a later date.—J. H.

out into the world to unearth this secret. For it must be remembered that I was but a lad of twenty-three, and that up to now, in spite of my many day dreams, I had been kept mewed up in the old manor with my father, knowing but little of what was going on in the great world.

Still, I was not so young but that I saw many difficulties in the way. I reflected that we had only the word of this Katharine Harcomb, who had lived at Rashcliffe Manor many years before, and who, according to my belief, had been dead for some time. Where had she been all these years? What were her motives in seeking out this mystery? and more than all, why had she chosen my father and myself as the men to whom she could disclose this momentous secret? Not that these matters troubled me much. I was too much excited by the story of the mystery to well weigh those things which, had I been ten years older, I should have considered carefully. Still, they came into my mind, and I was on the point of putting them to her, when she rose from her chair and placed her hand on my shoulder. I remember even then thinking how tall she was, for as I stood by the fireplace, and she came up to me, her face was level with mine, and I am not a short man.

"Roland Rashcliffe," she said, "will you undertake this thing?"

I looked at my father, who appeared to be pondering deeply.

"Where is it!" I asked.

"Where is what?"

"This black box."

"Before I make known where it is I must have your promise. Nay, Master Roland, look not darkly at me, for this is no light matter. I dare not make known the hiding place until I am assured that you will undertake to go wherever it is, and then alone, and in secret, bring it hither."

The words pleased me, although they raised more questions in my mind. I liked the words "alone and in secret," even although I little understood what they portended.

"How came you to know these things?" I asked.

"I saw the woman called Lucy Walters when she was

in England," replied Katharine Harcomb; "I saw her as she was taken to the Tower."

"You saw Lucy Walters!" I cried.

"Ay, I saw her. No wonder Charles Stuart loved her, for a more beautiful woman I never set my eyes on. Ay, poor thing, she was neither wise nor prudent, as she found out afterwards to her cost, but she was the fairest maid to look upon that ever I clapped my eyes on. It is true her first beauty had left her, and at that time she was in sore trouble, for she was on her way to the Tower with soldiers on either side of her; nevertheless, every man fell in love with her as she went. The verse-makers have called her the 'nut-brown maid,' and well they might, for her hair was the colour of ripe chestnuts when they are picked from the trees in early October. It shone like the dowager queen's diamonds, and hung around her head in great curling locks. Her eyes were brown too, and sparkled like stars; even then roses were upon her cheeks, and she walked like a queen."

"But she was liberated from the Tower," said my father, "and went back to France."

"But not before I saw her, Master Rashcliffe," replied Katharine Harcomb, "and not before she told me that she was Charles Stuart's wedded wife."

"She told you that?"

"Ay, she told me that."

"But did she tell you where the marriage contract was?" asked my father.

"Of that I shall say nothing until I know whether Master Roland here will undertake the work I have spoken of," and again the woman's dark bright eyes scanned my face, as though she saw there an index to the thoughts that possessed my mind.

"Roland," said my father, "I would e'en talk with Katharine Harcomb alone. Do you leave the room, and return in an hour's time."

I did not much like this, for, as may be imagined, I was much interested, and wanted to hear more of what the woman had to tell; but I obeyed my father quickly, as every dutiful son should, and went out of the house into the park lands.

The sun had now gone down, but it was not dark, neither did I think it would be throughout the whole night. For not only was there a moon, but the sky was clear. Indeed, the time was the middle of May, when the air was clear and the countryside was beauteous beyond words. It was true the roses had not yet appeared, but the trees were wellnigh in full leaf, for the season was early. Even the oaks and the ashes were covered with spring leaves, which I saw shining in the light of the moon. No stars appeared that night, the moon was so bright, and no sound did I hear save the babbling of the trout stream that ran through the park, and now and then the twitter of a bird which settled itself to rest.

I walked along the grass-grown drive which led to the gates, wondering about what the woman Katharine Harcomb had said, and thinking if ever the time would come when carriages would be drawn up to the house as they were in the days before the Long Parliament, and when my old home would be full of gaiety.

"This is a strange happening," I said to myself. "Ever since Richard Cromwell died my father hath spoken of a possible change to our fortunes if Charles should come back, not because the king would do aught for us of his own free will, but because we should gain the power to compel him."

And then as I thought of these things, in spite of the way the woman had inspired my fancy by the story of the king's marriage, the whole thing became like old wives' fables, and I was glad that I had not been led to make any promises.

I had barely got in sight of the gate where I had seen old Adam in the earlier part of the day, when I heard the sound of footsteps. They were not the footsteps of a man: of that I was certain. They were neither firm enough nor heavy enough. Moreover, they were uncertain, and, as I thought, feeble. I stopped and looked along the road, and saw the form of a woman coming towards me.

Bright although the moonlight was, I could not at first make out her age or her station, but as she drew nearer I thought that she was old and poor.

"Whither go you, dame?" I asked as she came up.

"And what is that to you, young master?"

By this time I was able to see that she was bent, and that her clothes were those of one of low degree. I knew by the way she spoke that she was toothless, for her words were not clearly spoken.

"It may be much to me, dame," I replied, "but whether it be or no, I would warn you against going to the house yonder, for the dogs be let loose of a night, and they would make short work of you."

She mumbled some words which I could not understand; then looking up at me, she said, "And who may you be, young master?"

"I am Master Rashcliffe's son," I replied.

At this she gave a start, and scanned me more eagerly than before.

"Ay, ay, I should a' known," I heard her mumble, "I should a' known, for did not Katharine tell me?"

At this I was all ears again, and all eyes too for that matter, for evidently she knew something of the woman who was even then at the house talking with my father.

"Dogs or no dogs, I must e'en go," she said presently.

"Why? is your business of import?" I asked.

"Ay, or I would not have come all the way from St. Paul's Cross to Epping. For that matter I should never have got here did not a man coming hither give me a lift on his cart. But, young master, tell me. Hath a woman come to your father's house this day?"

"What kind of a woman?" I asked.

"A woman who hath forty-five years, but carries them lightly," she replied; "a woman who hath not the attire of a woman of quality, and yet speaketh as if she were; a woman who years ago lived at Rashcliffe Manor."

"And if such a woman hath been here?" I said.

"Then must I go thither."

"But if she hath been there, and is gone?"

"Then lack-a-day, I know not; ay, but even then I must know what she hath told Master Rashcliffe."

"Come with me," I said; "I will take you to the house."

"But is she there?" she asked eagerly.

"Ay, she is there," I replied.

"Then let us go quickly," and although she still stooped low, she walked by my side at good speed.

A little later I led her into my father's hall, wondering at the meaning of what was happening, but little dreaming of what lay before me.

CHAPTER III

THE KING'S MARRIAGE CONTRACT

BIDDING the woman be seated, and going straight to the room we called the library, I knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" asked my father.

"It is I, Roland."

My father opened the door, and looked at me questioningly. I saw that the woman Katharine Harcomb was standing by the chair on which she had sat during the time I had been in the room; but the hard defiant look in her eyes had gone. Rather I thought I saw fear, almost amounting to terror in them. Evidently my father had been speaking about matters which moved her mightily. She no longer bore the expression of one who would make her own terms, but rather as one who lived under the shadow of a great fear.

"You are back soon, Roland," said my father, "it is not an hour since you left us."

"Nay," I replied, "but I met an old woman from St. Paul's Cross who was coming hither, who declared she must see Katharine Harcomb."

The woman gave a start as I spoke.

"Where is she?" she cried, "let me see her without delay."

"Tarry a little," said my father; "tell me more of this, Roland."

So without more ado I told him of my meeting with the dame, and of what passed between us.

"I would speak to her, I would speak to her alone!" cried Katharine Harcomb, like one bereft of her senses, and she made for the doorway as if to pass me. But my father closed the door quickly and seemed to be deep in thought. A moment later I saw that he had made up his mind.

"Have any of the kitchen wenches seen her?" he asked.

"Nay," I replied. "I myself opened the door, and she is waiting in the hall."

"Then do you bring her here, Roland, and afterward do you leave us again."

I have no doubt I showed my disappointment at this, for I was eager to understand the meaning of it all. My father took but little heed, however, so doing his bidding I went to the hall, where the woman was still sitting.

It was at this time I called to mind that I had not heard her name, so without first telling her to follow me where my father was I said quietly, "What is your name, good dame?"

"Name," she replied, "when Katharine Harcomb knows that Mistress Walters is here she will not keep me waiting."

"That is well," I replied; "will you follow me?" But although I spoke quietly my heart beat quickly, for I felt sure that she was in some way connected with Lucy Walters, whose son, Katharine Harcomb said, was the next heir to the throne of England.

No sooner had the library door opened than I saw the two women exchange glances, but I had no opportunity of noticing more, for my father gave me a look which told me that I must leave them alone, which I did much to my impatience.

I did not go far away, however. It is true I left the house, for cool as the night had become the air seemed stifling, so I stepped on to the grass outside, and began to walk up and down in the light of the window, behind which I knew my father and the two women were. How long I stayed there I know not, but it must have been more than an hour, for I noticed that the moon which stood high in the heavens when I went out had dropped behind the trees. In a sense the time seemed long. To a lad barely twenty-three, to be kept away from the knowledge of a secret which promised to vitally affect his future, was calculated to multiply every minute into five. Nevertheless I had so much to think about, that I thought but little of the time, and that in spite of my impatience. The

mystery of the box containing the marriage contract between the new king and Lucy Walters, and the woman's request that I should go on a voyage of discovery kept me wondering so much, that at times I almost forgot that I knew very little of the whole business, and that my father was even then talking about these things with the two women who had in such an unaccountable way entered my life.

The moon had sunk far behind the trees when I was startled by the loud voices of those within the house. A minute later I heard my father's voice.

"Roland, my son."

I entered the house again, and soon found myself in the room where I had left the two women. I could see that something of importance had passed between them. The woman Katharine Harcomb seemed much wrought upon, while in her eyes was a look which might mean anger or terror.

I looked from one to the other questioningly, for I was eager to know what had been said.

"Roland, my son," said my father, "you have long complained of idleness. You will have no need to complain longer."

I did not speak, although many questions came into my mind.

"Ay," cried the old woman, "and what is done must be done quickly and in secret, for remember the Duke of York is already at work. He knows that my grandson will be lawful heir to the throne, and if he can find the marriage contract, my poor Lucy's child will be kept out of his rights."

"You mean the new king's brother?" I asked, for I was somewhat taken aback by the vehemence of the dame's speech.

"Ay, who else?" she replied. "If Charles dies, will he not claim the crown? Already it is said that he speaks of what he will do when he is crowned."

"As to that," I made answer, "are not his chances small? He is but three years younger than the king, and may not live as long. Besides, Charles may marry again."

"He will," cried the dame, "he will, but there will be no children."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I do know, and that is enough," she replied. "Charles will never have a child which shall be heir to the throne of England save only the son of my daughter Lucy."

I took but little notice of this speech, although the dame uttered it with much warmth. I imagined that in spite of the severe measures which had been taken with witches, and those who professed to foretell the future, she had either consulted some of these people, or was perchance herself a "wise woman." Not that I paid much heed to these things, for my father, although he denied not that some had it in their power to reveal the future, had generally made light of their professions, and had taught me to treat them with scorn.

"Be that as it may," I said, "you have it that the new king married your daughter."

"Ay, I hold to that," she cried, "and poor and humble as I seem to be, I say that I am grandmother to him who should be king of England when his father dies."

"That remains to be proved," I said, for I was eager to get back to the question which had been broached by Katharine Harcomb when first we had met earlier in the evening.

"Ay, that remains," replied the dame, angrily I thought; "and it is by you, Master Roland Rashcliffe, that this is to be done."

"But why have you chosen me?" I asked, for young though I was, ay and eager to undertake any work which meant movement, and romance, I could not help asking why I among all others should be chosen for this work.

"You shall know some day Roland," said my father. "It is enough for you to know now you have a great work to do, a work which if successfully done will make you a power in England."

"But what is it?" I asked somewhat impatiently, for it seemed to me that I was asked to do something the nature of which was hidden from my eyes.

"To bring hither the marriage contract," he replied.

"Ay, but where is it?"

"It is in England," replied Katharine Harcomb, and then she looked at me with keen, searching eyes.

At this I doubt not I made an impatient gesture, for truly they seemed to regard me as a child who might not be trusted.

"Nay, be not angry," said my father, almost gently I thought. And this surprised me, for although I was a man in years he had not ceased to expect absolute and unquestioning obedience from me. In truth he held strongly that every man should be complete master in his house, and that no one should dare to dream of questioning his will.

But if I was not angry I was impatient. I had been on the tip-toe of expectation for hours, I had been told that I had a great work to do and yet I had only received hints as to how that work was to be done. For to be told that the marriage contract was in England was to tell me nothing, as any one can see. Still I held my peace and waited, wondering what was to come next.

"The marriage took place at a place called The Hague," said the old dame with downcast eyes, "away across the sea in that outlandish country called Holland. It was performed in secret by a Papist priest. The priest had to swear that he would never reveal the marriage, nevertheless my daughter Lucy, for the sake of her good name, so cajoled the priest that he drew up the contract and gave it to her, unknown to the king. For fear it should be taken from her she determined to place it in safe keeping."

At this the woman ceased speaking, while I, who had been waiting for some news, which would give me something like a reason for action, felt as though she were conjuring up a story.

"This showed," she went on presently, "that my daughter was not foolish as some have said, neither was she careless of her good name."

"But to whom did she give this precious document?" I asked, "and where is it now?"

"She gave it one in whom she trusted," said the dame sourly. "But he betrayed her trust. He found out the value of the paper, and brought it to England. Since then it hath changed hands again; but Katharine Harcomb hath discovered where it is now."

"Where?" I asked eagerly.

"It is at the house of Master Elijah Pycroft, who lives within five miles of Folkestone town," said Katharine Harcomb.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I have been told by one who knows," she replied mysteriously.

"And who is this Master Elijah Pycroft?" I asked again, for the whole business seemed to be as unsubstantial as a vapour cloud.

"Ah, it is easy to tell you who he is, but difficult to say what he is," replied the woman. "But there be many stories told about him. Some say he hath sold himself to the devil, others that he is at the head of a gang of highwaymen, and that although he never appears among them, it is he who gives them information and shelters them when they are in danger. I have also been told that he is a Papist who is a servant of the Pope, and is plotting to bring England back to Popery again. But it is he who hath the contract, and it is he who will make use of it, if it be not taken from him. Some have it that the priest who married Lucy Walters to King Charles is in league with him."

Now this seemed to be a cock-and-bull story, and yet it had enough of meaning to set my nerves a-tingling again.

"What is the name of the priest?" I asked. "Is his home at The Hague? Because he is the man to find out first of all. If he confesses to the marriage, then——"

"Do you dare to doubt that my Lucy was a lawful wedded wife?" cried the old dame angrily. "She that is dead now, poor child. Why think ye that the young King's mother, the old dowager queen, would have taken the boy if there was no marriage."

"Still it would be well to find him out," I urged. "Do you know his name?"

"That I do," cried she. "He is a French priest, and was in Holland only by stealth, seeing that the people who live in Holland do hate the priests so much owing to their past sufferings. But Lucy told me his name, she did, ay, she told me when she was in England before they put her in the Tower. For my Lucy was a Catholic at heart,

being brought to that way of thinking while she was in those foreign parts. He told her his name, and told her where he lived."

"Ah," I said, "that is better. Tell me, good dame."

"He lives at Boulogne," said the woman, "and his name is Father Pierre Rousseau, and I have been told that his church is the Church of St. Antony; but of that I am not sure."

But here at last was something definite to go upon. Boulogne was only a few hours' sail from English shores, and if Father Pierre Rousseau lived there he could be easily found out. I imagined that it would be easy to find out whether the woman's story were true or false, and upon this discovery a plan of action could be formed.

After this we fell to talking again, but beyond what I have written down, little of import could be gathered. I saw that much heed was paid to old wives' stories if they agreed with the desires of the women, but as to well proved facts there seemed nothing besides these two things. Still this was something. I could quickly find out whether Father Pierre Rousseau were flesh and blood, while the discovery of Master Elijah Pycroft should also be easy.

Had I been older, and known more of the ways of the world, I should, I doubt not, have asked many more questions, but by this time my mind was all aflame with the prospect of something to do, while the nature of my work was all that a youth might ask for. Neither did I trouble much as to why I should be chosen. My father had told me that I should know some day, and with this I was fain to content. I had a work to do, and that was enough.

"It may be that this priest knows more than he has told you," I cried at length; "my first business therefore will be to go to Boulogne, and after that to seek out Master Elijah Pycroft."

My father nodded his head approvingly, and yet I thought I saw doubt in his eyes.

"But what about the coming of the king?" I went on. "You told me only to-day that we must go to Dover to meet him, and if he comes to England soon, there will be no time for me to set out on my journey before seeing him."

"The king will not arrive for two weeks," replied m father.

"Two weeks?" I said questioningly.

"Ay, two weeks. This dame hath it, that according to messages which have been received in London town he wil not come until the twenty-seventh or the twenty-eighth da of the month. There will therefore be time, if fortune favou you, to do much of your work before he comes hither.'

Now being hot of blood, and not being aware of the many things which might hinder me, I was content with thi reply, and determined not to fail being at Dover when th king should land.

Without wasting time by retailing what was said further, I hasten on to say that by break of day on the following morning I was on my horse's back, clad in my best attire, on my way to Folkestone town, whither I hopec to get a passage to the coast of France. I was in gay spirits. I had pistols in my holsters, a sword by my side, and more money in my pouch than I ever hoped my father would give. Servant I had none, and that for two reasons. The first was, there was no man in my father's house who was fitted for such a post, even although I were rich enough to keep him; but more than this, it was deemed best that I should go quietly and alone, so that no one should suspect what my business might be. Servants, as all the world knows, have a way of talking about their masters' business, and if I had one he might unwittingly endanger me in my work.

My father had spoken gaily and confidently to me on my departure.

"I shall be at Dover on the twenty-sixth day of the month," he said. "I shall make my way to the *Fox and Hounds Inn*, and thither you must come and meet me, i your affairs allow you."

To this I gladly assented, thinking of the things I migh have to tell him by that time.

"And mark you, Roland," continued my father earnestly, "be wary and bold in this matter. If you succeed you will have such power at your command that even the new king will not be able to deny you what you ask. But be bold, my lad, and be wary. Speak but few words, and

when you speak impart but as little information as possible. Ask questions without seeming to ask them, and ask them in such a way as to befool those you ask. Never allow want of courage to keep you from obtaining what you desire. If you have to strike, strike hard. Be careful of your companions. Trust no man with your secrets. Remember that in ninety-nine times out of a hundred every man hath his own ends to serve, and if you are not eager and brave another will outdo you. Don't expect gratitude, and never trust any party or faction. Had I acted upon the advice I am giving you now, I should not be called 'landless Rashcliffe,' and you would not be a poor man's son. God be with you."

It was with these words ringing in my ears that I set my face towards London town on a bright May morning, and although it lay fully twelve miles from my home, I saw St. Paul's Church before seven o'clock, so early was I in the starting.

My heart was strangely light, I remember, for although I was much in the dark concerning my mission, its very nature stirred my blood, and made me fearless at coming difficulties. Nay, I rejoiced in them: who would not, when the fate of the country depended upon my success? To find the king's marriage contract, and thus alter the succession to the crown of England! Surely that were enough to give nerve to the letterless ploughboy, much less the only son of the bravest gentleman in the county of Essex.

So early was I in London town that I had to wait fully an hour before I could get breakfast, but this I presently obtained at an inn which stood close by Ludgate, and within sight of Fleet Prison.

I found that the talk of every one was concerning the coming of the new king, and every man seemed to be on the tip-toe of expectation concerning the revelries which were to take place when he appeared.

"Ay," said the innkeeper to me, "I know that Old Nol made the English feared the world all o'er, while never such an army was ever known as he led to battle; but what of that? He wanted to turn the whole land into Independent meeting houses. He wanted every man to turn

psalm-singer, and would have none about him but those who spoke the Puritan cant. If ever a man loved to see a cock-fight, or a bull baited, he was treated like a murderer, while no man dared to drink as an Englishman should drink. But that is all over now. The king loves his wine and his pleasure even as a king should. That's why he could not do with the sour-faced Scots. When he comes we shall be able to drink again, and these psalm-singing chaps will have to bark at back doors. Old Drury will have its fun, and a man will be able to speak to a pretty woman without being placed in the lock-up."

"Think you that aught will be done to those who fought against the new king's father?" I asked.

"Ay, that is what people say. Men have it that every Puritan will be dragged out of his house, and every man who fought against his sacred Majesty's person will be hanged. As for these Independents, well, already they who carried their heads so high be slinking along back ways like whipped dogs. Ah well, it is right. Let us live a merry life, and God save the king!"

Presently, as I went towards the river, I found out that the man had spoken truly: I saw men clad in sober-coloured garments talking to one another, as though some calamity were near. And this was no wonder, for presently, as the number of the people in the streets increased I saw that these same men were howled at by the mob. Some pointed to the Bibles which hung from their girdles, and called out "Pharisees, hypocrites!" Others again cried out "Psalm-singing rogues!" while others threatened them with the stocks and the pillory when the king came.

"It becomes worse each day," I heard one of these sober-clad men say to another.

"Ay, the Scriptures be fulfilled, and the devil is unloosed."

"The people of God will fare badly, methinks."

"Nevertheless, the new king hath promised that every man shall be forgiven for what he hath done."

"The new king! The son of Charles Stuart, a traitor and a liar whom our great Oliver beheaded! As well expect mercy from a wolf."

"Hush, man! If we be heard we shall be taken note of. Let us be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

And this kind of thing I found everywhere as I rode through London streets. On the one hand was a kind of lawless joy, which prevailed greatly; and on the other fearful forebodings as to the coming days.

But I stayed not long in London, for I was eager to make my way to Folkestone. The wedding contract hidden in the black box was more to me than the rejoicings of the Royalists, or the fears of the Separatists.

It took me two days to reach Folkestone; indeed, I did not reach this town till the evening of the second day. Moreover, the second day of my journey had been rainy, and I was both wet and tired when I reached the *Barley Sheaf Inn*, which looked homely and comfortable, for the which I was very thankful. As the evening was rainy, I thought I should perchance be the only traveller; but no sooner had the ostler taken my horse from me than I saw two persons ride up, which interested me greatly. Perhaps this was because they both seemed anxious to hide their faces. The one was, as far as I could judge, a strongly-built man, but of what age I could not judge; the other was a woman, clad from head to foot in a long cloak. Moreover, she wore a hood, which almost hid her face. Nevertheless, I caught one glimpse of it as she passed in at the door. It was as pale as death, while her eyes were full of terror.

"Private rooms," said the man, "and that without delay."

After they had passed out of sight I fell to wondering who they were; but I never dreamed then that their fate would be linked with mine in such a wondrous way.

CHAPTER IV

THE HAPPENING AT THE INN

AFTER I had partaken of food, I made my way to the harbour for the purpose of finding out when a boat might be leaving for the neighbourhood of Boulogne. By this time the rain had ceased, and although the night was wellnigh upon the town I was able to see something of its

character. Not that it was of any great note. It consisted of only a few narrow streets, which being wet, looked miserable and squalid. The bold outline of the cliffs impressed me greatly, however, and I judged that on fair days the whole district must be pleasant to behold.

I found as I passed through, that here as well as in London the sole subject of conversation was the coming of the new king, and of the changes his coming would bring about. Here also as in London, men had it that it would go hard with those who had fought against the late king, and especially against those who had put him to death. Nevertheless none, as far as I could discover, spoke against him; rather they even praised the profligacy of which all seemed to believe him guilty.

But much to my disappointment I could hear of no vessel that would leave for the French coast, at least for three days, and as I had not enough money to hire one for myself I had to content myself with the prospect of spending that time in the vicinity of Folkestone. I was not at all dismayed at this, for I reflected that I might be able to discover something of Master Elijah Pycroft, and might not indeed have to go to France at all.

When I returned to the inn I found my way into a large low room where several persons were sitting. Some were playing cards, others were drinking, as it seemed to me for the sake of drinking, while others still were laughing at their own wit for the want of something better to laugh at.

No one seemed to take note of my entrance, save one, who pointed to a seat by his side, as if to bid me welcome.

"What will you drink?" he asked.

"What is the house noted for?" I asked, for although I determined not to drink, remembering the old adage that "when the drink's in the wit's out," I thought it best to attract no notice by failing to fall in with the custom.

"Sack, my master, sack," replied the man. "There is no better sack between here and London town than can be bought at the *Barley Sheaf*, and what is more a man can drink his fill and no questions asked. We be no longer troubled by a sour-faced Independent constable who is ever on the watch for a man who seeks to be merry."

"Did they trouble you much in Cromwell's days?"

"Trouble me! Marry, and that they did. No man pleased unless he carried a Bible at his belt, and sung psalms through his nose. Why a man could in no wise make merry. The man who kept a dog or a cock was watched day and night, while those who were suspected of having a Prayer-book in his house was almost as much in danger as those who read the Bible in Queen Mary's days. Why even the town crier had to speak through his nose, as though he were singing psalms in church."

At this he laughed as though he had made a good joke.

"But all will be changed now?" I suggested.

"Ay, but they be changed already, young master," said another man who was listening. "Already Old Nol's people be seeking to make friends with those who be shouting 'God save the King?' while a man may kiss his sweetheart, and no questions be asked. And what would you? The king, who hath received fifty thousand pounds from Parliament to buy himself good clothes, and good wine, hath sent word to us that we must drink his health in the best wine and ale that our town affords."

"Ay," said the other, "and painters be everywhere washing out the State's arms and painting the Lion and the Unicorn instead. I do hear, too, that the king hath given orders that all the vessels built by Old Nol are to be renamed, as his Majesty doth much dislike the present names."

"Have you heard aught concerning what will be done to those who took part in the king's father's death?" I asked.

"I would not stand in their shoes for something," he replied significantly.

"In spite of the Act of Oblivion," I suggested.

"Act of Oblivion! Think you that the new king will forget the names of those who killed his father? Why I do hear that Sir Charles Denman is even now being followed by those who were faithful to Charles I."

"Sir Charles Denman, who is he?" I asked, for I had never heard his name before.

"Never heard of Sir Charles Denman! Why where have you lived, young master? He was one who cried loudest for the death of Charles I, and who hath ever since Richard Cromwell died done his utmost to persuade

General Monk against having aught to do with the new king. He hath spoken words which are said to be treasonable, and what is more is as fanatical a preacher as Hugh Peters himself."

"Ay, but there are no edicts out against him ?" I queried.

"But there are, young master; at least so men say. Some have it that the king, no sooner was he invited to come back to his throne, than he sent secret instructions that Sir Charles should be arrested and imprisoned until his Majesty's pleasure be known."

"Know you aught of Sir Charles ?" I asked.

"Nay, I know naught, but men have it that he is a dangerous man, and not to be trusted. I have been told that his very preaching is only a cloak to cover up his misdoings. Men say he hath never married, and yet he is accompanied on his journeys by one who ought to be his wife. It is said, too, that he whips her as a man might whip a spaniel. A sullen, cruel man whom no one loves."

At this I was silent, whereupon the man went on.

"Some have it that he is married to this woman, who is of low degree, while other gossips say that he hath stolen her from her father's house, because she will inherit a great fortune when her father dies."

"Have you ever seen him ?"

"Nay, but I am told he is the best swordsman in the kingdom, that he is deadly with the pistol, and that he shows no mercy anywhere ?"

"And are all the people loyal around here ?" I asked.

"Ay, what would you ?"

"And all the old families will receive the new king with open arms ?"

"Ay, all as far as I know."

"I do not know the names of these families—at least not of all," I said, feeling my way towards the information I desired, "but you as an important man doubtless know them all."

"Ay," he replied, sitting back in his chair with a look of importance on his face. "There be the Jeffries and old Sir Michael Oldbury, and Admiral Billton, and Squire Barton, and my Lord Bridgman, and others. Most of them nod to me when they come to town."

"I think I have heard of a Master Pycroft," I said, "know you him?"

He shook his head. "No," he replied, "there be no man of note within ten miles of Folkestone who bears that name."

At this my heart seemed to sink in my shoes, for it seemed as though I had come on a fool's errand. Still I kept a brave face, and answered as though the matter were of no import.

"I must have mistaken the name," I said, "or perchance he lived in some other part of the country."

"Stay," said the man, "there is an old place called 'Pycroft,' but it hath been in ruins for years. It is an old house among the Pycroft woods, and is said to be haunted. No man lives there, but I have heard that an old miser had it long years ago. He was killed for his money, and ever since the place hath been infested by evil spirits. Years ago, about the time the king was beheaded, I mind me that I passed by it, but not a soul was to be seen, The windows were broken, and the gardens were all covered with weeds. Neither sight nor sound of living being could I see or hear. Even the birds seemed afraid to sing."

"What was the name of the miser?" I asked.

"People called him 'Solomon the Fool,'" replied the man. "'Solomon,' because he was said to have much learning, and 'The Fool' because he did not know how to use it. Ah, and now I come to think of it, I have heard that it was once held by the Denmans, but whether they were any kin to Sir Charles, of whom we have been speaking, I know not."

After this I learnt but little more, for a man came in who said he had ridden from Dover, and began to tell of the grand preparations which were being made to welcome King Charles II when he landed on English shores. So feeling somewhat weary, and desiring to think of what I had heard, I made my way to the chamber the innkeeper had allotted to me, and then by the light of the candle which had been given to me, I sought to set down in order what had happened to me since I left London town. I had come to my chamber very quietly, but even if I had made

a noise the shouts of the revellers in the room below had drowned any sounds I might have made. When I had been alone an hour or more, however, they began to grow more quiet, which led me to think they were leaving the inn for their homes. I therefore decided that I would undress and go to bed, but on second thoughts I simply pulled off my riding boots and doublet and threw myself on the bed. I did not feel at all sleepy, but ere long I felt myself becoming drowsy; but even then I did not think I should fall asleep. In this I was mistaken, however, for after that I remembered nothing until I suddenly awoke.

At first I scarce remembered where I was, but the sound of some one sobbing brought everything to my recollection with great clearness.

"No, no! Not that!"

I heard the words with great distinctness, and they were spoken by a woman. Moreover, the one who spoke them was in great terror, for although she spoke not loudly, I detected the anguish in her voice.

As may be imagined, the woman's cries caused me to listen intently.

"I tell you, yes." It was a man's voice I heard, and the partition between the room in which I lay and the next, from whence the sounds came, was so thin that I could hear much of what was said. "This must be done. It is my will."

He spoke in a low voice, but it vibrated with passion.

"But it is more than five miles away, and it is midnight."

This the woman said in a low, fearsome voice.

"What of that? The distance is not too great for you to walk easily. You have rested, and you have had food. As to its being night, so much the better. Every one is now abed, and no one will see you."

"But the way is lonely; besides, the place hath an evil name. You have told me yourself that it is haunted."

"So much the better for my purposes. You must go thither, and find out what I have told you of. You can be back here before folks be astir."

"It is cruel, cruel," said the woman with a sob.

"It is your duty; you owe it to me," replied the man. "Besides, you dare not refuse. If I speak but a word you

know what will happen, so do my bidding, and that without delay."

"But who shall I find there? It is said to be an empty house; besides, perchance I cannot find it. It is in the midst of woods; and even if I met some one on the road, I dare not ask them where Pycroft is."

At this, as may be imagined, my heart gave a great bound. These people were speaking of the very place I desired to enter; moreover, there was evidently some secret surrounding it. Did this man know aught of what had been told me? Did he seek to find the king's marriage contract as well as I? Besides, who was he, and what was his relation to this woman? These and many other questions I asked myself as I lay silently on my bed, for in my eagerness I did not realize that I was playing the eavesdropper. In truth, everything had come upon me so suddenly that I scarce understood what was taking place.

"There will be no difficulty in finding the way," said the man. "You will climb the hill out of the town, then you will take the road that leads to London. This road you wot of as well as I. When you come to the pond by the roadside you will see the gate on the right side of the road, and from there you can easily follow the path leading to the house."

"But why can you not go yourself?" said the woman.

"Because it is not my will," replied the man. "Besides, it would not be safe for me to go until I know the old man's thoughts: he might betray me, and than what would happen to you?"

"To me?" repeated the woman.

"Ay, to you. Whither can you go if I cease to protect you? Ay, and what will befall you?"

"But I have done nothing."

"Nothing! Then go and show yourself to him. Ay, let it be known in the inn who you are. If I had not given you my name, where would you be now?"

I have recorded this conversation as well as I am able; nevertheless I cannot vouch for its entire correctness, seeing that many of the words were almost inaudible.

After this I heard sounds as though some one were preparing to go out; a little later there were footsteps along

the passage, and then silence. My nerves were all tingling, while my brain was in a whirl. What did all this mean, and what had I to do?

In a minute my mind was made up. I would wait until all was silent, and time given for the man to return to his chamber, and then I would creep out of the house, and follow the road the man had so clearly marked out. If their interest was at Pycroft, so was mine; besides, my heart went out in sympathy towards the woman whose voice was so plaintive, and whose condition seemed so piteous.

Presently I heard stealthy footsteps outside my door. They passed along the corridor, and presently were lost in the distance. Now was the time for me to act. All my weariness had gone; I was eager and alert; the mystery upon which I had happened threw its spell upon me, and I longed to discover its meaning. Besides, it fell in with my plans; and I remembered my father's words warning me never to allow want of courage to stand in the way of fulfilling my purpose.

I fastened my sword carefully by my side, and having seen to my pistols, I took my riding boots in my hand, and crept carefully along the passage towards a doorway I had noted during the evening. No one seemed astir, and the house was as silent as death. When I came to the door, I found that it was unbolted. Evidently the man had left it so that the woman might enter when she had performed his mission.

Closing the door silently behind me, I pulled on my boots, and a minute later was creeping silently up the hill out of the town. Once away from the houses, I realized the cruelty of the man in sending out a woman on such an errand. It is true the night was neither dark nor cold, but for a woman to take such a long weary journey alone at such a time was hard indeed. The country, since Oliver Cromwell's death, had become infested with footpads, while the thought of going to a haunted house was terrible enough for a man, much less a woman. Besides, she was troubled by some fear. The man had some power over her beyond the ordinary, or she would never submit to his will. What was it? I called to mind the story told me concern

ing Sir Charles Denman that very night. Was this man Sir Charles? And was this woman the one who had been associated with him? This might be the case; and yet I could not believe it, why I could not tell. Perhaps it was because I had learnt to be wary of stories told at taverns and inns, perhaps because I desired another solution to the mystery.

When I was well out in the country I stopped and listened. I also looked eagerly along the road, but I could neither hear nor see the woman I had come out to follow. Thereupon I started running, for the road was better than ordinary, and the light of the moon revealed all pits and dangerous places. Presently I reached the top of the hill, where the road crossed an open space. Neither hedge nor ditch hid aught from me, although a mile on, skirting the open plain was a belt of trees. Here I stopped again, and gazed eagerly along the roadway. Yes, there could be no doubt about it, away in the distance was a dark object.

Up to this time I had formed no plan of action save to follow the woman. Now it came to me that if I desired to speak to her I should not know what to say, while if I watched her without letting her know of my presence I should be acting the part of a spy. She was alone and unprotected, she did not know that I heard something of what had passed between her and the man at the inn. Therefore my presence would give her a fright, while I had no excuse for intruding upon her, as she took this lonely and mysterious night journey.

What an older man might have done I may not say. What I should do now that I have passed the age of impetuous youth I dare not hazard. But then I was young, I knew naught of the world, and the mission upon which I myself had come caused me to surround everything with the halo of youthful vision. I determined that I would overtake her, tell her that I had heard what had passed between her and the man at the *Barley Sheaf*, and then offer to accompany her on the journey. Doubtless an older man would have acted differently, but I suspect that my decision was that which any youth of my age will understand.

I therefore commenced running again, and I saw that every step lessened the distance between me and the dark

form which toiled silently along the lonely road. Not a house was in sight, neither could I see aught but the line of road curling its way along the heather covered land, and the belt of trees which lay beyond. I ran silently, because I kept on the edge of the road, where grass grew, and as I drew nearer I saw that the woman kept straight on, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Presently the moon, which had been under a cloud, shot into the clear sky, so that I could see her plainly. She was clad from head to foot in a long garment, while on her head she wore a hood, as if even in the loneliness of midnight she desired to hide her face. I could see, too, that she was tall and that she moved with rapidity and ease; but that was all, for her back was toward me, and although the light of the moon was bright I could not even tell the colour of the garment she wore.

As I came up close to her, my heart fell to beating wildly, not because of my exertion in overtaking her, but because of the strangeness of my adventure. In truth it seemed as though I were in a dream from which I should presently awake, only to find what had taken place was but the wild fancy which comes to one when one loses control over one's own imaginings.

Whether I should have dared to speak to her I know not, but when I was only a few yards from her I happened to kick a stone which lay in my way, and as it rattled along the road she turned around sharply, and with a cry of fear.

"What do you wish?" she asked, and I noted that her voice trembled not one whit.

But I did not reply; I was so much wrought upon that no words would come to me.

"I have naught to give you," she said, "so pass on and allow me to go my way."

As she spoke her hood dropped from her face and I saw her every feature plainly.

CHAPTER V

A MIDNIGHT MEETING

MY first glance at the woman's face showed me that it was the same as I had seen a few hours before. In

the moonlight she looked very pale, and I saw that she was young, not indeed as I judged more than twenty years of age. But what struck me most was the fact that she betrayed no fear; rather I saw a look of defiance, and I could not understand how a woman who had, as I thought, been cowed by the man at the inn could meet me here alone at midnight and be so brave. Nay, as I thought, there was a look of defiance in her face, and a confidence in her own strength.

"I desire naught from you, and I have no will to molest you," I said.

"Then go your way."

"Ay, I will go my way," I replied, "and perchance my way may be yours."

"It cannot be. If you have no will to molest me, take your road and I will take mine."

Her quiet confidence almost angered me. Fearfulness I was prepared to meet, while cries I expected; but to be quietly commanded to pass on, knowing what I knew made me somewhat impatient, and hence more at my ease.

"It may be, mistress, when I have told you what is in my mind, you will not be so desirous to be rid of me."

"There can be naught in your mind that concerns me." Then with a flash as quick as light she said, "Do you boast of gentle birth, young sir?"

"I am of gentle birth," I replied.

"Then you must know that when a lady would be alone no man of honour will stay by her side."

"That's as may be," I replied. "The lady may be surrounded by dangers of which she knows nothing, in which case the man of honour will stay and protect her even against her will!"

For a moment she gazed around her as if she apprehended danger, but only for a moment.

"Will it please you to pass on?" she said.

"Not until I have told you what is in my mind."

"Then you are a spy."

"As you will," I replied, for the words angered me, and even although I had no sufficient excuse for remaining by her side, I determined to know more of her.

"Perhaps my first impression was right," she went on,

" and you are a common thief. If so, it is useless coming to me, I have no money."

At this I was silent, for my brain refused to give me a suitable answer.

" So having no money, and having no desire to remain longer in your company, I will e'en go on my way."

" No you will not."

At this her eyes flashed like fire.

" Why ? " she asked.

" Because you are afraid to let me know where you are going."

At this she gazed fearfully at me, but she spoke no word.

" Nevertheless, I know the place for which you are bound," I said. " But if I were you I would not go."

" Why ? "

" Because the man who sent you seeks only his own safety and not yours. Because he desires to use you only as a key to unlock the door by which he would enter, because he has gained power over you only to make you his tool."

" What do you know of the man who sent me ? "

This she said, as I thought, involuntarily, for she quickly went on : " How do you know I have been sent ? In these days even a woman may——" and then she stopped suddenly, like one afraid.

" Because I have been staying at the *Barley Sheaf*," I replied. " Because I saw you come to the inn ; because I heard your conversation to-night with the man who hath sent you to do his bidding, against your own will."

" Then you *are* a spy ? "

" If you will, but let me tell you what is in my mind before you call me by that name again. I was awakened an hour or two ago by the sound of a woman sobbing. She was pleading with some man not to send her out at midnight, but he persisted. I heard him threaten her, I heard him tell her that if her name were known some dread calamity would happen to her. I knew that he had some power over her, possessed some secret concerning her, and that she had perforce to do his will."

" Well, what then, sir ? " she asked sharply.

" He commanded her to go to Pycroft, along a road that is infested by footpads."

"And what have you to do with this?"

"Nothing except that I determined to follow her, and offer her what protection and help I could give her. Ay, and more, to rid her from the man who is so unworthy to call himself her protector."

At this she came up close to me, and looked steadily into my face.

"Is that all you know?" she said.

"That is all."

"And that is your reason for following me?"

"That is my reason."

"What is your name?"

I could see no harm in telling her. My name was unknown, and my mission hither was, I believed, a secret.

"Roland Rashcliffe," I said.

"Of Epping?"

"Of that family, yes."

"And this is true?"

"On my word as a gentleman, yes."

Again she looked at me steadily as if she were in sore straits what to do, and did not know whether she might trust me.

"You know nothing about me beyond what you have said?"

"Nothing."

"And you desire only to see me safe from harm?"

"That is all," and at the time it was true, for under the influence of the woman's presence my own mission to Pycroft seemed of little import.

"And if I allow you to accompany me you will ask me no questions."

"I desire you to answer no questions of mine, nor to reveal to me anything which you would keep secret."

"You do not know my name—nor his name?"

"No."

Again she scanned me eagerly, and then looked around her. All round us was a weary waste of uncultivated land, beyond the dark woods a cloud shot over the moon, while away in the distance the horizon was blackened by what looked like a coming storm. The winter had gone,

and the spring was upon us, nevertheless the night had grown cold. I saw her shudder.

"What are you?" she said. "Roundhead, or Cavalier?"

"I do not know."

At this she looked at me suspiciously.

"My father fought for the king in the first Civil War," I replied. "But I have stayed at home all my life. I have not interested myself in politics. I have helped to look after what remains of my father's estates."

"You have spent your life in idleness?"

"I have sought to learn those things which may become a gentleman," I replied. "I can use a sword, and I am not altogether an ignoramus."

"You love books then?"

"I have read the writings of both William Shakespeare and John Milton," I replied, "and I know a little of such writings of Corneille and Moliére as have been brought to this country."

"You know French then?"

"A little. But that hath nothing to do with my desire to befriend you. You are in trouble, and I would help you."

"You desire not to harm me?"

"So help me God, no."

"But why are you here?" she asked suspiciously. "If your home is at Epping Forest, what are you doing at Folkestone?"

"I came at my father's bidding," I replied after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, you have a secret, too," she cried.

At this I was silent, while I wondered at the quickness with which she fastened upon the truth. Nevertheless, I was sure her voice was friendly, and I thought she was glad to have me near. And this was no wonder, for courageous although she might be, her mission was one which must strike terror in the bravest heart.

But still she hesitated. What was passing in her mind I knew not; but I imagined that two fears fought one against the other in her heart. One, the fear of going alone to the haunted house situated amidst the great Pycroft woods, and the other the fear of accepting the protection

of one of whom she knew nothing, and whom she had never seen until that hour.

The winds blew colder, while away in the distance I heard the rumble of thunder, and this I think decided her. Had it been day I do not believe she would have listened to me for a moment, but it was night and a thunderstorm was sweeping towards us; besides, although a courageous one, she was still a woman.

"Promise me again that you will not seek to interfere with my mission, or to harm me," she said.

"I promise," I replied.

"I will accept your escort," she said. "Come quickly, for what is done must be done quickly."

We walked together across the broad open land, while the black cloud grew larger and larger. The moon had also sunk low, and the night had grown dark. Even now a strange feeling comes into my heart as I think of our journey towards the old house, for reared in the country as I had been, ay, and in the very midst of the great forest which lies east of London town, I thought I never knew any place so lonely as this. Besides, I knew naught of my companion. That she was young, and fair to look upon, I could not help seeing, but I knew not her name, neither did I understand the mystery which surrounded her life.

Twice I saw her turn and gaze furtively at me, as though desiring to know what was in my mind, but for the most part she walked straight on, never turning to the right nor to the left.

Nearer and nearer we came to the pine woods which stood on the edge of the open land, and as we did so drops of rain began to fall upon us. Then I thought I saw her shudder, but she spoke no word. In spite of the way she had spoken to me, I fell to pitying her more than ever. For truly it was a sad predicament for a young maid, evidently well-born and tenderly reared, to be placed in. From what she had said to the man at the inn, she knew nothing either of Pycroft or its inmates, neither could she tell what her welcome to the lonely house would be like.

Once she stopped and listened as though she heard strange sounds near, and then presently moved on again

without a word. By and by we came to a pond beside the road, close by which was a gateway. Beyond were, as far as I could judge, dense dark woods.

"This is the place," I said.

"How do you know?"

"It accords with the description the man gave you at the inn."

"Yes, but you know nothing of those who live at the house?"

"Nothing."

"You may accompany me until we come in sight of the house, but after that you must go no further."

"Why?"

"You promised to ask no questions."

"I promised not to interfere with your mission," I replied, "neither will I. I have kept by your side for more than two miles without speaking a word concerning it. Nevertheless I have not promised to obey you in all things. Had I, I should not be by your side now. I cannot promise not to go too close to the house. It may be that you will need help, and I mean to keep close by your side."

"But why?" and I thought my words gave her comfort.

"Because I desire to be your friend."

In this I spoke the truth, for although I had it in my heart to enter the house in order to carry out my plans, yet my pity for the maid, and my determination to befriend her became stronger each minute.

"My friend!" she said. "You do not know what you say. Do you know what it would cost to be my friend? Besides, why should you? You do not know who I am; you have never heard my name."

"No," I replied, "I have never heard your name, I do not know who you are."

"Then why should you desire to befriend me?"

I could not answer her, neither for that matter could I answer myself when the question came to me. But I think I know now. Although my father had taught me to distrust all men, he had always led me to think of my mother as a beautiful noble woman, one who was as pure as an

angel, and as truthful as the sun which shines in the heavens. Thus it came about that I was led to look at womanhood through the medium of my mother's life, and to regard it as a gentleman's duty ever to treat them with respect and reverence. Nay, more, I had learnt, I know not how, to regard it the first duty of a man of honour ever to seek to befriend a gentlewoman, and that at all hazards.

"Because you are a gentlewoman, and you are in trouble," I said.

We had been standing beside the pond during this conversation, as though we desired to delay entering the dark woods close by. Once beneath the shadows of the trees we should scarce be able to see each other, but here no shadow fell, and I could see her plainly. I heard her sob, too, as though my words had touched her heart.

"Do not be afraid," I said, "I will let no man harm you."'

I spoke as a brother might speak to a sister, and there was naught but pity in my heart. Perhaps my voice had a tremor in it, for I was much wrought upon. Be that as it may, for the first time she lost control over herself, and she gave way to tears.

"I am afraid, oh, I am afraid," she said.

"You need not be," I said, "no harm shall befall you."

"Oh, but you do not know. You do not know who is by your side, you do not know what I fear."

"You need not fear to tell me," I said.

"Fear to tell you!" she cried, "but I do. Ay and if it were known that you walk by my side, and that you seek to befriend me, your life would be in danger. You do not know why I have consented to come here, you do not know of what I am accused. Nay, if I told you my name, you would either drag me back to Folkestone town and tell——" Here she ceased speaking, as though she were frightened at her own words.

"No I should not," I made answer.

"Why?"

"Because I do not believe you are capable of committing a crime."

At this she laughed aloud. A hard, cruel, bitter laugh.

"You had better go back to your bed, Master Rashcliffe," she said. "You do not know why I am here, you do not know what my mission is. I will tell you. I am here because I fear the devil, and because I seek to do his bidding."

She said this as if through her set teeth, and, as it seemed to me, with terrible passion. In spite of myself I felt a shiver pass through my veins. Nevertheless I still pitied her. For be it remembered I was only twenty-three, and the sight of the maid was in truth piteous. All the same the words I spoke next were dragged from me almost against my will.

"What!" I cried. "Have you sold yourself to the devil?"

"Ay, Master Rashcliffe, that is it, and I have found him a hard master."

I saw her clench her hands as if in a frenzy, while her eyes gleamed with a great passion.

"I do not believe in such things," I said, for although many witches had been burnt in England, even in my time, I had no faith in much of what I had heard.

"Why do I go up to the old house in Pycroft woods?" she went on. "Is it for pleasure? Have you not heard it is haunted? I tell you deeds are done there which would frighten you, brave as you think you are. And I go because I must. Now had you not better go back and leave me?"

"No," I made answer. "I will accompany you even as I have said."

"But you promised not to hinder me."

"No, I will not hinder you, because, in spite of what you say, I do not believe evil is in your heart."

"There you make a mistake, Master Rashcliffe. I have evil in my heart. And it is not without reason. Have you a sister?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Because if you had you might understand me. If you had a sister, bound to obey a bad man, as his wife, would she not be justified in having evil in her heart?"

"His wife?" I cried.

"Ay, his wife!" and at this she laughed bitterly.

"Now you see how useless it is for you to try and help me, for a wife must obey her husband no matter what he commands her. Do you think I would be here else? Look!" and she showed me her left hand, where I saw a plain gold ring.

At this I said nothing, nevertheless I did not in any wise think of giving up my determination to accompany her.

"You are still determined to enter this old house?" I said quietly.

"I go because I must," she replied.

Without another word I opened the gate and motioned her to pass in.

"You still persist in going?" she said, as if in astonishment, but she passed through the open gate, while I walked quietly by her side.

It was not easy to keep to the track, but I managed to follow it while the woman, who I was sure felt glad that I had persisted in accompanying her, kept near me. How long we walked I do not know. The woods grew darker and thicker, while the very air we breathed seemed laden with mystery and dread.

Once or twice I stopped, for I thought I heard footsteps, but as I listened all was silent.

"Oh, I am afraid," she said again and again. I did not reply to her, for I had no word of cheer to offer. In truth I was not far from being afraid myself. An open enemy I could meet as well as another, but the dreadful silence, with the occasional suggestion of stealthy footsteps, made my heart grow cold in spite of myself.

At length the track ended in an open space, and then my heart gave a leap, for a little distance away I saw the dark outline of an old house. Never until then did I realize how dark and lonesome a human habitation could be. Not a sound could I hear save the beating of our own hearts, naught could I see but the grim walls of the time-worn building.

"Look," she whispered fearfully. "Yonder is a light."

She spoke truly, for almost hidden by a large evergreen tree, yet plainly to be seen was a tiny light.

"That will be Master Pycroft!" I said almost involuntarily.

For answer she only shuddered, and then without saying a word she walked in the direction of the light.

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD HOUSE AT PYCROFT

STRANGE as it may seem, I had during the time I had been with this woman well nigh forgotten my own desire to enter this old house in the midst of the Pycroft woods. My own mission had somehow become dim and unreal. My interest in the strange journey of my companion had been so strong that nothing else seemed of much importance. Nay, more, although my plan of accompanying her to this place, in order that I might gain knowledge of the thing I desired to possess, first helped me in my determination, I had never considered the reasons which should induce her to come hither. That she went there at the command of the man at the inn was plain enough, but why he wished her to go I had not even tried to surmise. The reason for this was, I suppose, owing to the fact that I was carried away by the excitement of the hour.

Now that we were within sight of the house, however, everything came to me like a flash of light. I realized that I was not only the companion of the woman, who at the bidding of her husband travelled to this lonely house at midnight, but that I had travelled thither that I might also discover the secret that lay therein. Then another thought struck me. Might not my own quest be associated with hers? Why did the man send her hither? It was for no light matter. Coward although I believed him to be, a midnight journey such as this must have sufficient reasons. Moreover, how could I help this woman—for this I had determined to do—unless I knew the reasons of her obedience?

My mind, I remember, was strangely clear at the moment. Excited as I was, all the issues came to me plainly, and I felt I must form some plan of action without delay. During the whole journey I had asked her no questions concerning the inmates of Pycroft Hall. According to

the man in the inn the place was inhabited only by the spirits of the dead. Solomon the Fool, as he had been called, was dead, and the place had fallen into ruins. Nevertheless, some one lived there. The man at the inn had said something about an "old man," from whom the woman was to obtain what he desired. What did this mean? Who was this old man? And what connexion had he with the person to whom Katharine Harcomb had referred?

All these things whetted my curiosity, and made me determine to penetrate the secret of the light at the little mullioned window, and to learn what lay within the grim dark walls. I therefore hurried to the woman's side.

"Do you realize what you are doing?"

"Ay, I realize."

"But you must not go in there alone."

"Yes, I must go alone."

"No, I shall accompany you."

"You must not. You dare not."

"I must, and I dare," I replied. "I have promised to protect you, and I shall keep my word."

"Ay, and you promised not to interfere with me," she said. "I have your word as a gentleman. Besides if you went in there your life would not be worth a groat. You would never leave it alive."

"Why? Is it the home of a band of robbers?"

"It is the home of darkness. Besides, I must go alone—alone I tell you. Things are done behind those walls from which you could not protect me, from which no one can protect me save him who—who will not."

"Then why go?"

"Because I must. Because—but what is that to you? You have accompanied me hither against my will. You have given me your word of honour not to hinder me in the work I have to do—to try and learn nothing from me which I do not wish to tell you."

"I am determined to protect you," I said. "If there is danger there for me, there is danger for you. Nay more. I am a man and can protect myself, while you are a woman, weak and helpless."

"Weak and helpless!" She turned to me with flash-

ing eyes as I had seen her first. "I am neither weak nor helpless," she said angrily. "I do not carry a sword, but I have weapons of which you know nothing, Master Rashcliffe. Moreover if you dare to hinder me I will use them, and perhaps against you."

Was this an empty threat, or was there some meaning behind it? Certainly she looked as though she might carry her words into effect, and I realized that although she had been moved to tears during the journey, she was no weak, helpless creature, but a strong woman, capable and self-reliant. It came to me then, moreover, as I have discovered since, that it must have been something beyond the ordinary to cause her to obey the man at the inn in this matter, even although he exercised a husband's control over her. Still I was not to be daunted by a woman's anger, and I answered calmly but firmly—

"I will keep to my words," I said; "I will ask you no questions which you do not desire to answer; but because I am determined to protect you I will discover the secret of this house."

At this she looked steadily in my face again, and by this time there was sufficient light for her to see my features plainly.

"Then let me tell you this," she said quietly. "If you seek to enter with me you will place me in danger. You will—but never mind. If you desire to befriend me, I beseech you not to enter with me. Even now, even by being with you here, I may be writing my own death warrant. Oh, you do not know, you do not know! If you desire to go there," and here she pointed towards the light that still twinkled from the window, "well go, although I would beseech you never to seek to penetrate those walls. But do not come with me now. If you do I am undone."

She spoke in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper, but there was such intensity in her voice, almost amounting to agony, that my heart failed me. Moreover I considered that if I went with her I should not be able to discover the thing I desired. I reflected that above everything my work must be done in secret, and to go with her would be out of accord with the plans I had been formulating.

"Has the person who caused the light to shine there power over you?" I asked.

"I will answer you nothing. Find out what you will and how you will, but do not seek to go with me."

I do not think she fully realized what she was saying, so eager was she to be alone. I could see that she desired at all costs to be rid of me, and at that moment I thought of a plan whereby I could seemingly yield to her desires and still have my own way.

"But what would you have me do?" I asked.

"You desire to help me?"

"Yes. I have said so. Nay, I am determined to protect you."

She hesitated a second.

"Then stay here until I return. I shall not be long, at least I do not think so."

"But if you are in danger there?"

"If I am, and I need your help, I will cry out loud enough for you to hear me."

"Then I may enter?"

"Then you may enter—yes, if you can."

There was mockery in her tones, but it was the mockery of despair.

"Very well," I replied quietly, "I will obey."

She looked at me eagerly.

"And you will not interfere with me?"

"No."

"And you will remain here hidden from sight?"

"I will stay outside, hidden from sight, but I shall be near to help in case of need."

She heaved a sigh as I spoke, a sigh with a tremble in it, and I knew she feared to do the work that lay before her, whatever it might be. But she did not hesitate. Walking in the direction of the house, which was about a musket shot away, I saw her walk steadily across the open space that lay between me and the house, and a little later was lost behind the dark shrubs that grew close to what I thought looked like the entrance to the building.

I waited in silence, straining every nerve to catch the least approach of sound, and presently heard the sound of voices. After that all became silent. The light still

shone from the window, which as I have said was partly hidden by an evergreen tree that grew near. The fever of discovery was now hot upon me. I remembered the woman's words, "Find out what you can, and how you will, but do not seek to go with me," and I determined to act upon them. Evidently she believed that I could discover nothing from the outside, but I believed otherwise. It was this belief which caused me to yield to her wishes and remain outside. No sooner, therefore, did the sound of voices cease than I went stealthily across what had at one time been a lawn towards the evergreen tree I had seen growing near the window. I saw in a moment that it suited my purpose, and a few seconds later I was perched on a branch on a level with the window from which the light had been shining, but which was now dark even as the others were. This, as may be imagined, ruined my plans. My desire had been to look through the window, and so watch what took place in the room, and now everything had come to naught. Still I waited. I reflected that the light meant some living person in the room. It suggested that whoever lived in the old house used this part of it as a dwelling place. Even if the light was gone now it might be brought back presently, and I had plenty of time to wait. Meanwhile I placed myself in a position to watch the window, while the trunk of the tree was such an excellent protection that any one could pass under it, and look up at it, without ever dreaming that I was there. As far as I could judge the tree was about twenty yards from the house, thus while it was not near enough for me to hear much, it enabled me to see clearly.

I had not been there more than a minute when a light shot from the window again, and I was enabled to see the interior of the room. But this was of no great use to me, even although I saw on a table many things which were strange to me, and which even now I cannot describe. What was of interest to me was an old gentleman carrying a candle. I could not see his face as plainly as I desired, for the panes of glass were small, while in the centre of each one was a large lump which wellnigh blurred any object which lay behind. Presently, however, I saw that one of the panes had been broken, and by means of this I was able

to see clearly. But my range of vision was narrowed. As I have said the panes of glass were small, and so I could not see the whole of the room; still, by means of supporting myself by holding the trunk of the tree and stretching as far as I could in each direction, I was able to obtain a view of a large part of the room.

After some trouble, therefore, I could see the old man's face more plainly. I saw that he was very old and looked dirty and unkempt beyond relief, his hair being in tangled wisps over his shoulders, while his beard seemed to well-nigh reach his waist. But old as he was there were no signs of decrepitude. His movements were quick and decided. His hands were steady, while there was an eager look on his face. His eyes were wellnigh hidden by his huge overhanging forehead and his bushy eyebrows, but as far as I could judge his sight was not dim.

No sooner had he entered than he was followed by another form. This I saw in spite of the badly made glass, but who it was I was not sure. It might have been a man, or a woman—I could not tell.

"The night is cold, come near the fire."

I heard these words plainly, but that was practically all I did hear during the time I was there. As I have said, the tree on which I was perched was twenty yards from the window, and except on this one occasion nearly everything was said in a low voice.

But his words enabled me to see who the other occupant of the room was, for at his behest the woman whom I had accompanied almost all the way from Folkestone town came to a part of the room where I could see her plainly. She had thrown off her headgear, and the heavy cloak which she had worn, and when I saw her there I wondered more than ever what business she could have with this old man. I have said that I thought she was young when I saw her at first, but in the light of the candle which fell straight upon her face she did not look more than nineteen years old. Her hair had been disarranged on her journey, but I saw that it lay in curling richness over her head. In colour it was glossy brown, which was very near chestnut around the temples. Her features seemed to me the most noble I had ever gazed upon. It reminded me more of

what I had read of the old Greek goddesses than of an Englishwoman. Every feature was clearly cut, and but for the look which seemed to me like despair, which gleamed from her eyes, and rested on her face, I thought she would be beautiful beyond any one I had ever seen.

Presently they both drew near the fireplace, and both stood within the range of my vision at the same time. Then the strangeness of the situation came to me more vividly than ever. The old man with his long tangled locks of white hair, his head sunk in between his shoulders, his long beard wellnigh reaching the middle of his body, and with eager looks flashing from his deep sunk eyes, and the woman young and beautiful, her face clearly outlined, but pale as death, her hair like a flashing *nimbus* around her head, and her eyes fixed on the strange specimen of humanity before her.

As I have said, I could catch little or nothing of the purport of the conversation; but I saw that both looked eager and determined. Presently after the woman had been speaking the man shrugged his shoulders, and laughed mockingly. He spread out his large bony hands deprecatingly and I could see from the expression on his face that he was telling her that it was impossible to grant the request.

Then she changed her attitude. She appeared to be angry and to threaten him. I saw her lift her right hand and point at him with her forefinger. She seemed also to be urging something that made him afraid, for I saw him look around the room like a man in fear. But this was only for a moment. By the time she had finished speaking he had regained his former self-possession and seemed to regard her threats as so many idle words.

Then I thought they changed places. He seemed to be making some request of her, a request which I thought put fear into her heart, although she yielded not to him. If she could not make him bend to her will neither could he make her bend to his. What impressed me, moreover, was the courage of this young girl. For although she might be the wife of the man at the inn, ay, and even obeyed him in unreasonable requests, she held her ground boldly before this old man living in the lonely house in the midst of the

Pycroft woods. But the wonder of it was to me beyond words. A young girl fighting for her ends against this weird looking old man. What was the meaning of it?

Presently their conversation seemed to change again. I saw her point to the curious looking things which lay on the table, and this drew my attention to what seemed to me like glass tubes, several strange looking vases, and, what was to me more strange and mysterious still, two human skulls. As she spoke he took up one of the skulls, and as far as I could judge began to tell her something of the horrible thing which he held in his hand.

To this she seemed to say something as if in protest, for I heard his answer, in a harsh cracked voice.

"Let them. They who would harm me must know my secrets, and they who would know my secrets must penetrate the depths of this old brain. And can they, ah, can they?"

Her reply to this did not reach me plainly, but I gathered that she told him of men who for dealing with the powers of darkness had suffered at the stake.

"Burn me!" he cried, and his voice reached me clearly. Let them try. Before a man is burnt, he confesses, and I would confess! Ay, I would confess such things as would bring many a high head low. Judges, judges. Ay, but who is the judge that would dare to anger me?"

He shook his fist angrily, while his long beard waved to and fro as he shook his head in rage.

After this I could gather nothing for a long time. Sometimes they moved to another part of the room and then I could see nothing but dim blurred figures behind the thick uneven glass, while their voices only reached me in low mutterings.

After a time they moved near the fireplace again, and then I saw another look upon the girl's face. I saw fear and anxiety which I had not noted before. Evidently he had told her of something, or she had somehow discovered something, that moved her more deeply than anything which had gone before. The look on her face was pleading, and she held up her hands beseechingly. I saw, too, that the old man was evidently well pleased with himself, for I heard him give utterance to a pleased little cackle, which he intended for a laugh.

"And if I do, and if I do, little Constance, what then?"

Again she spoke eagerly, passionately I thought, while the look on his face became more and more full of self-satisfaction.

"Ah, ah," I heard him cackle, "so you discover that Old Solomon still hath his wits, eh? That his bow hath many strings, eh? That he hath not sold himself to the devil for naught, eh? Ah, ah, but it does an old man's heart good to see you, pretty little Constance."

I had discovered her name at last. Constance. At that time I could think of nothing sweeter, even although it was spoken by this withered, wrinkled old man in tones of ribaldry and mocking. Put it down to my youth if you will, but the knowledge of her name made me long to be her friend more than ever.

I looked away towards the eastward sky, and saw a faint glow in the horizon. Evidently morning was drawing near. In another hour the sun would have risen, and I began to wonder how the strange visit would end; but in another moment the thought of morning was driven from me, for I saw that the girl had fallen on her knees before the strange old creature. I caught no words, but that she pleaded with him was evident, while more than once I heard her sobbing. I saw too that he seemed to be relenting, nay, I thought I saw even tenderness on his creased forbidding face, which was followed by a look of cunning.

"And if I do, what then?" I heard him say.

But of her answer I caught nothing, although I strained every nerve to catch even the faintest sound.

"More than that, more than that, pretty Constance," I heard him say. "Obedience, my pretty bird, obedience!"

And now I saw a look of terror in her eyes, yet did she keep on pleading until the old man seemed to make up his mind to grant her request.

I saw him leave the room, while she stood like one transfixed. She was standing where the light shone straight upon her face, so that I could see every feature, but nevertheless I could read no story thereon which revealed her secret. Courage I saw, tenderness I saw, nay, more it seemed to realize that it was not her own battle that she

as fighting. What fear she had was not for herself. For ho was it then? I could think of no one save the man : the inn, and there came into my head a great anger, ıd a desire to wrest the secret of his power over her from im.

What led her to the window, I wondered. Was it the ıint twitter of the birds which began to bestir themselves t the rising of the King of Day, or did she give a thought) me who had promised to wait outside for her. I saw her lace her face close against the glass and look steadily out. Vhat was in her mind, I asked myself. Did the thought ıat I was near give her comfort or help? She could not :e me, for it was yet dark and I was almost hidden by the ·ee which I had climbed; nevertheless she kept her face ıere until she was attracted, even as I had been attracted, y a noise in the room.

She turned around quickly, and then I saw her move ıstily away. She was now behind the thick uneven glass gain, so that I could see nothing clearly, but I could have vorn that I saw another woman there. What she was like could not tell, for she never came to that part of the room here I could see plainly. A minute later the woman who ad been my companion left the room with the other, while ıe old man stood watching the door, with a look of doubt ı his face, as if he doubted the wisdom of what he had one. A moment later he followed them, leaving the room . utter darkness.

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERY OF PYCROFT

I WAITED a few minutes, but no one came back to the room. Moreover dawn was now appearing; the birds ere singing louder every minute; the silence of night was ying in the gladsomeness of a new day. I crept down from ıe tree, my mind wellnigh bewildered by what I had seen ıd heard. When I had left my home two days before had no idea that I should so soon be enshrouded in the ists of mystery. Nay, a few hours before, when I had dden up to the inn in Folkestone town, I did not dream ıat before sunrise new interests and new hopes would arise

in my life. Yet so it was. At sundown my one hope was to find the clue to the hiding place of the marriage contract of the new king with Lucy Walters, now, although I had in no way abandoned the mission which inspired me when I set out, it had become interwoven with other interests which kindled my imagination and stirred my heart even more.

Who was that old man? Why did he live there all alone? What was the secret of that old house? What was the link that bound the woman I had accompanied hither with this strange old creature? Why had she come hither, and who was that other woman who had come into the room?

These and a hundred other questions haunted my mind as I waited near the house, while both eyes and ears were open to every sight and sound. Almost unconsciously I crept away to the spot where I had separated from the woman, and this place being somewhat higher than the house gave me a full view of the building.

As day came on, the outlines of the house became more clear to me. I saw that it could scarcely be called a mansion, while on the other hand it was larger than a farmer's dwelling, nay for that matter it was evidently intended as the dwelling place of a man of importance. It was a low irregular building, built of stone, and was evidently of great strength. The doors were heavy and iron studded. The mullioned windows were so constructed that no one could enter through them. Moreover iron bars obtained everywhere; at no place, as far as I could see, could any one find an entrance, save at the will of those who dwelt within. An air of dilapidation reigned. There was no evidence anywhere that the place was inhabited. The paths were covered with weeds and grass. What were at one time flower gardens had become a wilderness. The grass grew in large quantities, while wild flowers were appearing in great profusion. But nowhere was human care visible.

The spring air blew fresh and cold, and although the birds sang blithely they did not dispel the feeling of desolation which everywhere reigned. Had I not seen those two women and the old man I should have said that Pycroft Hall had been deserted at least ten years. Nothing sa

irds and insects betokened life. Not a bark of a dog, or he low of a cow even, could be heard. All told of lonely lesolation.

In spite of myself I shivered. My clothes were wet vith dew, and standing in the shadow of the trees as I was he rays from the rising sun did not reach me. Like a man lazed I crept to an open spot where the sun shone, but it eemed to give no heat. Bright spring morning though it night be it was deathly cold, and more than all, my heart vas cold.

I waited in silence, how long I do not know, but it seemed long time. Still I remained there, listening for the sound f footsteps, and for the presence of the woman. I made p my mind concerning the questions I should ask her. unning, searching questions I thought they were, such as ould lead her, unknown to herself, to give me the clue to ne secret which threw a shadow over her life. I planned ow I could gain her confidence, and, presently, by my own isdom and courage, free her from the weight which I felt ire was crushing her.

Meanwhile the sun rose higher and higher. The day was ow fully come, and yet neither sight nor sound reached ie.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked myself. "She romised to cry out if she were in danger. She told me o wait for her."

I called to mind that she had said nothing concerning her ture plans, or of her return to the inn at Folkestone. hen a thought came to my mind which dismayed me and etermined me to take action. I therefore left the spot here I had been standing and crept closer and closer to ie house. I did not keep within sight of the windows. feared to do so, not for my own sake but for hers, even though I did not know what harm I should be doing her y exposing myself to sight. Still I remembered how gerly she had pleaded with me not to enter the house ith her. I judged she was anxious that I should not be en by the man with whom she had an interview that night. I was not long in discovering, however, that my precau- ons were needless. No one appeared, and all was silent. resently growing bolder I walked around the building.

There was no sign that any living being save myself was near. Every door, every window was closed and bolted, and as I listened the silence of death seemed to reign in the old home of the Pycrofts.

"She is gone," I cried out like one bewildered, "but whither hath she gone? what hath happened to her?" But only the deathly silence of the deserted house made answer to the question which had unwittingly come to my lips.

At first I could scarcely realize it, and I could not help believing that the dread calamity at which she had hinted had befallen her while in the company of the man.

Presently I climbed to one of the windows, some of the panes of which were broken, and looked in. I saw only an empty and deserted room. It looked very dreary just then, although I doubt not that at one time it had rung with joyous revelry. It was a large dining hall, oak panelled and oak ceiled. The chimney piece, moreover, although black with age and smoke, was quaintly carved, while there were many other indications that the builders of Pycroft Hall were people who loved things tasteful and pleasant to behold. I placed my ear to the broken pane also, but no sound could I hear. A silence like unto that of death reigned.

At this time all through which I had passed through the night seemed like a dream, and I felt like doubting the things which I have here set down. Especially was this so when, emboldened by the continuous silence, I gave a shout, which echoed and re-echoed through the forsaken rooms.

"What hath happened to her?" I asked myself again and again, and each time I asked the question the more difficult did the answer become.

Presently I took a more commonplace view of the matter. "Doubtless she hath gone back to Folkestone," I said to myself; "perchance, moreover, the other woman I saw hath gone back with her, while the old man hath accompanied them a part of the way. After all the woman did not promise to return to me. She did not ask me to accompany her; rather it was against her will that she allowed me to walk by her side. Perhaps if I make haste I shall overtake them before they reach the *Barley Sheaf.*"

But although I said this I did not leave the place at the time the determination was born in my mind. There still remained lingering doubts whether she was not immured in this lonely house, and whether she might not even then be needing my aid. But after I had again made a journey around the building, I was led to the conclusion that it was deserted. I would have given much to have entered, so that I might have set my doubts at rest, but as I have said, every door was closed and bolted, while every window was so barricaded that no man might enter except after great preparations.

I therefore presently turned back disappointed and weary; the woman, the pathway of whose life I had so strangely crossed, had willed to go away without telling me whither she had gone, or perchance she had been compelled to do the will of the man with whom I had seen her in the room opposite the fir tree.

There seemed no reason why I should trouble about this, yet I did. A great weight rested upon my heart and, even when I had left the Pycroft woods and was out on the main road again and saw the clear blue sky above me, I was oppressed by what had taken place and I accused myself of being unfaithful to the promise I had made.

What o'clock it was when I reached Folkestone town I know not, but it was yet early, for but few people were stirring, neither did the inmates of the tavern seem to have aroused themselves from the carousal of the previous night. I found the main door opened, however, so I entered as carelessly as I was able, in the hope that if any one appeared I might give the impression that I had gone out for an early morning walk. But no man molested me as I found my way to the chamber which had been allotted to me, neither could I hear a sound coming from the adjoining room. All was perfectly still.

I went into the corridor and listened intently, but no man stirred. If the man, the thought of whom aroused angry feelings in my heart, slept near me, he must have slept as peacefully as a child.

After a time I heard the sound of bustle and movement in the rooms beneath me, and then, although the thought of food had never entered my mind during the night,

I felt a great hunger. I therefore made my way down stairs, where great steaks of ham fresh from the frying pan were speedily set before me.

"A fine morning," I said to the maid who brought them.

"Ay, it feels like summer," she replied.

"Are there many people here who have been sleeping at the inn to-night."

"I dunnow," and with that she left the room.

I thought the maid desired not to answer my question, but this, while it aroused suspicions in my mind did not keep me from eating a hearty breakfast. Moreover, I felt neither tired nor sleepy. My journey of ten miles, my long watching and waiting, seemed to have affected me not one whit, and when I had finished breakfast I had no more weariness than when I had left my home two days before. In spite of my anxiety, too, I felt strangely light of heart, and as the sunlight streamed into the room I found myself humming a song.

"Good morning to you, young master, and a good appetite."

It was the landlord who spoke, the very man I wanted to see.

"The same to you Master Landlord," I replied.

"Ay, but I spoiled my appetite an hour ago, young master. An innkeeper must needs be an early riser."

"Ay, I suppose so," I made answer, blessing my stars that the man had given me the very opening which I desired. "Doubtless some of your guests have taken leave of you this morning."

"As to that, no, young master."

"Ah, no one has left you to-day?"

"No, not to-day?"

"That is lucky for me," I said, "for I had fears lest one of your guests whom I wanted to see had left before I had a chance of speaking to him."

"And which might that be, if I am not making too bold in asking?" he said, and I thought his eyes searched my face curiously.

"The Cavalier who rode up last night with a lady."

"Ah, but which?"

"I saw but one," I made answer. "He came up even

while the groom was unsaddling my own horse. A tall man, with black hair just turning grey. He wore a grey feather in his hat, and his sword was jewel hilted."

"That description might apply to many a traveller who puts up here," he replied. "His name, young master, his name?"

"As to his name," I replied, for here the man had found a weak place in my armour, "well there may be reasons for not mentioning it."

"I have naught to do with nameless wanderers, young master, and thank God the country will have less than ever to do with them since England's true king is coming back. Each traveller who comes to this inn gives his name as a gentleman should. It is well known for five miles around, ay, fifty for that matter, among those who travel, that *The Barley Sheaf* bears a name second to none. Its sack is of the best, its company the best, while neither footpad nor traitor is ever welcomed within its walls."

The man spoke as I thought with unnecessary warmth. There seemed no reason why he should be so anxious to defend the character of the house before a youth like myself, who made no charges against it.

"Methinks he does protest too much," I said to myself, calling to mind the words of Master Will Shakespeare, whose writings had been little read during Cromwell's time, but whose plays I had often read with much delight. Still I remembered my father's advice, and determined to arouse no suspicion in his mind.

"I heard of that before I came hither," I replied. "As to the sack, and the company, I made acquaintance with both last night, and that with rare pleasure. Nevertheless a man doth not blazon his name on the walls of every inn he enters. Even King Charles II, who is expected to land at Dover before many days are over, had often to enter places like this under an assumed name, as every one knows right well. And, even although times will be changed at his return, it may be that many a man, while he may give his name to such as yourself, will not care to shout it aloud to the tapster or the ostler."

"Ay, there is reason in that," replied the innkeeper,

" and I perceive that young as you are you are a gentleman of rare wit."

" As to that, mine host," I made answer, " I may not boast, still I have wit enough to know that it may not always be best to speak names aloud in an inn, although the king will be in England soon."

" God bless King Charles II, and down with all psalm-singing traitors," he cried fervently.

" Amen to that," I cried; " down with all traitors whether they sing psalms or no. But to come to my question, since the worshipful gentleman whom I have described hath not had the misfortune to be obliged to leave this hospitable house, I trust you will take my name to him, with the request that I may enjoy a few minutes of his company."

" You mean the gentleman who rode a grey horse with a grey feather in his hat, and carried a jewelled hilted sword? "

" Ay, I mean him. He was accompanied by a lady, who wore a long cloak, and whose face was wellnigh hidden by her headgear. I heard him ask you for private rooms as he entered."

" But did you not know? "

" Know what? "

" That he left last night at midnight."

" At midnight? "

" Ay, a messenger came bearing him important news, and although the lady had gone to bed he had to arouse her, ay, and the ostler too for that matter. Both their horses were saddled, and they rode away at one o' th' clock, but whither they have gone I know not."

At this I was silent, for I knew that the man had told a lie.

" But what would you? " continued the innkeeper. " We shall have bustling times now, and the innkeeper's trade will be brisk, so he must not grumble. Besides, he paid his count like a prince, and would not take the silver change that he could rightfully claim."

Now this brought me to a deadlock, as can be seen. I dared not ask direct questions, first because I did not wish to arouse suspicions, and next because I feared by

so doing I should show my state of utter ignorance concerning the man about whom I inquired. Still when one is twenty-three one does not lack confidence, and youth will dare to rush bareheaded where an older man would hesitate to enter with a steel head-cap.

"Ah, I would I had known," I replied. "I could perhaps have told him that his danger was not so great as he imagined."

At this he started like one surprised, while his eyes flashed a look of inquiry.

"Danger?" he said questioningly. "What danger, young sir?"

"Better not give it a name," I made answer. "Besides I do not know how much he hath told you, and I would betray no man's secrets. Solomon said many wise things and wrote them down in a book, and Solomon, whom some call a fool," here I stopped, and looked into his face, "although his writings are placed among the holy Scriptures, said that there was a time to hold one's peace as well as to speak."

"Solomon had many ways of obtaining knowledge," he said, almost timidly I thought.

"Ay, some have said that they were means known only to himself."

I could have sworn that the man trembled. Whether I was getting any nearer the truth or no I knew not, but I was sure that my words were construed by the innkeeper in such a way that he fancied I was the possessor of the secret he had sought to hide. Still the man doubted me, and he did not seem inclined to offer any information.

"God save King Charles II," he said, as though he thought I doubted his loyalty.

"Amen to that," I replied. Then I continued quietly, still watching him: "Charles is a good name, whether borne by a king or another man."

Now whether he was too thick in the head to understand the drift of my words, or whether I was on the wrong track I know not; whatever may be the truth he suddenly left the room, craving pardon for leaving me so abruptly, and assuring me that he had many things to attend to that morning.

Alone again, I had time to collect my thoughts. The landlord's communication if true, left me more in the dark than ever. That he had told me lies I knew, but whether it was a lie that the man had left the inn I had not yet been able to discover. I called to mind the words I had heard spoken in the bedchamber next to my own, and remembered that the man had told the woman to return early in the morning before any one was astir. Would he, having given such commands, depart at midnight leaving her alone and helpless?

In truth the mystery in which I had become involved seemed to entangle me more than ever. Then I called myself a fool for not taking a necessary step, and one which would have occurred immediately to any one that was not half-witted.

I hurried to the stables, and there I found that, whether the landlord had spoken truly or no, the horses which had brought the man and woman the previous night were gone. Only my own stood there eating her fill of oats. I went to her and patted her, and then looked round for some evidence which might tell me how long it was since the others were taken away. But nothing could I see. The stable was cleaned, and every mark that they had been there was taken away.

The ostler entered as I made the examination.

"No horses here beside mine, ostler?"

"No sir; I had to get up in the middle of the night to saddle two which came about the same time as yours. I was rare and tired too. But there was a lady in the question, and you are old enough to know that what a woman wills will have to be."

"Ay," I replied with a laugh, wondering whether his information had not been given at the command of the innkeeper.

I therefore pretended to take no further notice of the fellow; nevertheless I kept him within sight, and presently when I saw him go up to the landlord, as though he had some special communication to make, I drew my own conclusions.

Nevertheless I was at my wits' end what to do. I had done all that was in my power, but as yet I had found out

nothing. The man and the woman had crossed my path, and the man had gone without my speaking a word to him But the case of the woman was different. I had seen her and spoken to her. I had heard the note of pain and anguish in her voice, I had watched her face as she spoke with the old man at Pycroft Hall, the man who my father believed held the secret of the king's marriage. But she had gone, leaving no trace behind. What was the meaning of it all? I wandered over the cliffs which border the sea at Folkestone, and presently my thoughts became more clear. If the old man possessed the secret of the king's marriage he also possessed the secret of the woman's life. It was true I had not been able to enter Pycroft Hall that morning but it might be that he would again visit it during the night. Well I would go to the old place again that night, and if the light shone at the window, I would demand admittance and then trust to my own courage and wit to meet whatever I might happen to see.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW I ENTERED PYCROFT

DIRECTLY I had made up my mind to pay a second visit to Pycroft Hall my spirits rose, and my heart grew warm. The thought of meeting the weird old creature, and speaking with him face to face, stirred my blood, and kindled my imagination. Moreover, for the first time the new king's marriage contract became real to me. For what did not come to me through the night came to me on the cliffs. And this I have found since then; it is when I have a sense of freedom that I am able to think. When I am beneath tall trees, or imprisoned within stone walls, my mind refuses to grasp the issues of things. But when I stand in the light, in God's open places, not only does my natural vision widen, but also the vision of mind and soul becomes more keen and has greater range. The thoughts which a man thinks in the dark, and in cramped places, are smaller than those which come to him beneath the great dome of the sky, when the wind blows free, and naught belittles his sight. At least this hath always been the case with me. When I would think the best thoughts

I am capable of thinking, I long to live in a large place where the sunlight is strong.

Through the night I had wondered blindly what drew the woman to Pycroft Hall, and what was in the man's mind who sent her there, but no answer came to me. Now, as I walked along the cliffs, in sight of the great sea whose waters flashed brightly in the light of the early summer's sun, I thought of many reasons. And this among others: If my father and Katharine Harcomb, and Lucy Walters' mother had heard of Pycroft Hall, and of Elijah Pycroft, why not others? If I had been led to try and obtain power over the king might not others? If the man who had sent the woman to Pycroft at night were Sir Charles Denman, a man upon whom the king's anger rested, would he not desire to move heaven and earth to possess a secret whereby he could make terms with his monarch? If I had heard of the king's marriage contract he also had heard of it, and had sent his wife to obtain knowledge of the thing. But why had he sent her? To this many answers came. For one thing he was afraid, and for another he believed that this beauteous woman would succeed where he had failed. Besides his power over her was great. She also lived in great fear, and he used that fear in order to make her obey his behests.

All this seemed so natural that I called myself a fool for not thinking of it before. Why had I allowed my opportunities to slip through my hands? Besides, might not the woman have succeeded? What was the meaning of the other woman entering? And more, whither had they gone?

But this did not trouble me much. There was no sign of victory on the woman's face. Had she gained possession of such papers she would have revealed her victory, whereas I had seen her face the moment before the other woman had appeared, and it told only of yearnings and the shadow of a great fear.

I am putting down these thoughts here, so that those who may hap to read this may see the position in which I was placed, and the difficulties that stood in my way. I am aware also that those whose thoughts are clearer, and whose minds are better balanced than mine, may have good reason

for thinking that I had acted foolishly, and had taken altogether the wrong way to accomplish my purpose. I would have them remember, however, that I was but a lad of twenty-three, and that youth is not famed for its discretion. Moreover, as I look back now, I wonder what I could have done whereby I could better have accomplished the thing I had set out to accomplish.

Before I had been on the cliffs an hour, I had made my plans, and these I started to carry out without delay. First of all I went back to the stable and had my horse saddled, and having ridden four miles in the direction of Pycroft Hall, I cast my eyes around in the hope of seeing some one. But no one was in sight. The neighbourhood was thinly inhabited. Not a horseman was to be seen on the road, not a labourer was working in the fields. I found out afterwards that practically the whole country side had emptied itself in order to be present at the landing of the king at Dover. That not knowing the exact day of his coming they had gone to Dover a few days in advance so that they might be certain to be there to give him a royal welcome. In truth I found out that for a full week before the king came the town of Dover was a huge fair, and that revelry continued from midnight to midnight without ceasing.

Presently, however, I caught sight of a man who was cutting wood by one of the fences some distance away, whereupon I rode across the fields to the place where he was.

He looked at me attentively, and then held the tool with which he worked in such a way that I imagined he thought I meant to attack him.

"You be young for your work, young master," he said, eyeing me grimly.

"Why?" I asked pleasantly.

"Otherwise you would never come to a working man who has not a groat in his pouch," he replied.

"Why, you think I am a footpad?" I asked.

"Else why should you gallop across hedges and ditches as though the devil were behind you? Eh, young man, give it up. It only ends in the gallows, and it must be a fearful life to live, always seeing the rope's end dangling before your eyes."

"Instead of wanting to take your groats from you, my man, I will e'en give you one instead. Nay, believe me, I am peaceably inclined, and instead of being a highwayman I am making inquiries about an old house which I am told is empty, and which may perchance be for sale."

Again he looked at me, and then touched his hat respectfully.

"You be from London, young master?"

"I left London less than a week ago," I replied. "I have come in search of a house, and I have been told there is one near here, which being empty and forsaken, a man might buy cheaply."

"The name o't, young master?" he said questioningly.

"It is called Pycroft, or some such name," I replied.

"And is it Pycroft you thought of buying, young master?"

"Rather, I am come to ask questions about it."

At this he laughed. "No man will ever live at Pycroft," he said.

"Why? Is not the house a good one?"

"It's the company, not the house I was thinking of."

"The company?"

"Many and many's the one who has thought of living at Pycroft, but no man hath dared. Through the day it's right eno', but at night the trouble begins. There is not a witch for twenty miles around but gets her marks at Pycroft; there's not a witches' revel but is held there, and as every man knows after they have met at their revels the devilry begins. The corn is blighted, the cows give no milk, the murrain blights the stock, children have the rickets, and everything goes wrong. I have heard that it can be bought for an old song, but no man will buy it. Through the day it seems all quiet and restful, but at nighttime blue fires have been seen there, awful smells come from there, ay, and the devil hath been seen there."

These last words the man spoke with a shudder.

"It is said," he went on, "that the parson, who is a man of God if ever there was one, and who is death on wizards and witches, is going to appeal to the new king to have it blown up with gunpowder, so that we may have peace and quietness again, and so that farmers may sow their corn without fear that it will be blighted before harvest comes."

"But what is the cause of all this?"

"Ah, you are not from these parts, and have never learnt. Solomon the Fool lived there. Who he was nobody knows, but he came there long years agone before I came to live in this parish, and I have heard that he had dealings with the Pope o' Rome. Anyhow, some said that his life was in danger, and in order to be match for all the world he sold himself to the devil."

At this I could not help laughing, for although such stories were generally believed in, that which I had seen the night before drove such thoughts from me.

"Ay, you may laugh, young master, but it is no laughing matter. For years he did things which no one can explain, and all sorts of things happened. Then one day he died."

"Died!"

"Ay, it must be ten years agone now, and ever since then no man will go near it after sundown. While the sun shines the devil dare not go there; but after dark Old Solomon and the devil do come back, and there Old Solomon do plead with the devil to give him back his soul."

Again I could not help smiling, even although the man's face was pale with fear.

"Ay, young master, but let me tell you this: One night three of the strongest men in these parts were over at the *Queen's Head*, in the parish of St. John, drinking. You may have heard of them even in London. Three brothers, and each man of them stood over six foot and a half high. Well, they declared after they had each drunk a quart of strong ale that they feared nothing under heaven. Then the landlord made a bet that they dared not go and spend the hours from eleven to one o'clock in the middle of the night at Pycroft. Well they took the bet, for five pounds it was, and the next night Jack, and Jim, and Tom Turtle started for Pycroft. A lot of us walked with them to the gates, and although we were in great fear we waited for them to return. We comforted ourselves by trying to sing psalms and saying our prayers, as the parson advised us to do. But we didn't have to wait two hours, young master. Before midnight they was back to us again, and each of them was trembling like an aspen leaf."

"Why, what did they see?"

"Ay, master, we could never get that from them, except by little bits. One spoke of blue flames, another told of howling, another said he had seen Old Solomon come to life again, and he chased them through the woods. The next day, when they told the parson, he went up there; but naught could he see. Every door was locked and barred, every window was fastened."

"And were there any evidences that any one had been there through the night?"

"Ay, there were; the parson saw footmarks which were half the footmarks of a man, and half of a beast. But that was not all. When the parson tried to look into the place, through a window where a small pane of glass was broken, he smelt brimstone—brimstone, young master. And since then the parson hath it that while a man may be safe to go there while the sun is shining, ten chances to one but he will be met with the devil after sundown. And so no man will buy the house, master, and no man will go there after dark."

"But from whom did this old man Solomon get the house?" I asked.

"It is said that he was one of the Pycrofts, but I know not. Some have it that old Lord Denman had it at one time, but I do not know. Others say there's a spell cast upon it. Certain it is that the parson says that on a huge stone near the front door these words are carved—

A Pycroft built this house
In the hardest of stone
And the mortar was truly mixed
With a Pycroft's blood and bone,
If another here would live
Because of a well-lined purse,
The mortar shall become
The buyer's lasting curse."

In spite of myself the labourer's talk made me pause, but I was not the son of my father for naught. The teaching of a lifetime was not to be destroyed because of an ignorant man's vain babbling, and I held to my resolution to visit the old place again that night. I therefore presently rode back, and after a hearty meal I fell asleep, from which I did not wake till sundown.

I gathered that no one asked any questions why I was there; in truth, every man seemed too much interested in the coming of the king and the changes that would be wrought in the land to trouble aught about me; so, telling the landlord that I should not be back until late, I left the inn about an hour after sundown and took a round-about road to Pycroft. Moreover, I took good heed that I was not followed, and by an hour before midnight I had entered the dark woods that grew around the lonely house.

Now, although I had carried a brave heart during daylight, I was not able to choke down my fears in the darkness. I have been told that nature hath given me firm nerves, moreover, I can meet a danger as well as another man without showing fear, but once within the shadow of the woods which surrounded the haunted house I confess that my heart wellnigh failed me. The stories which the labourer had related came back to me with great vividness, so that before I had come within sight of the house I seemed to be surrounded with all sorts of grinning things, some of which lured me on, while others warned me against going farther. The cracking of every twig made my heart beat faster, the twitter of a startled bird told me that I was in a domain where the devil held his revels and where spirits of darkness worked their will.

Still I determined to go forward. I was calm enough to know that on the morrow I should laugh at these fancies, and that, did they hinder me from carrying out my plans now, I should all my life accuse myself of being a poltroon. Besides, what report should I have to give to my father, the man who knew no fear and who would be ashamed of a son who believed in old wives' fables? So I set my teeth firmly together and trudged my way through the darkness, stopping every now and then to listen if any one was near.

Never shall I forget my journey along that lonely pathway, for as I look back now, it seems to mark an era in my life. But of that I must not speak now: I will tell my story in as straightforward a way as I am able, so that those who read may judge for themselves. And yet, if I felt fear, I maintain that it was no wonder, for my experiences were not those with which a man meets every day. Be-

sides, I had but three days left my home, where I had lived an uneventful life, and now to be cast alone amidst mystery and danger was a matter of no small moment.

Presently I emerged from the woods into the open space where the woman and I had stood on the previous night. I could see the moon, but it seemed to sail in a hazy light, while around it was a great ring. Not a sound could I hear. The songs of the birds had ceased; not an insect moved its wings: all nature seemed asleep. After waiting a few moments, scarce daring to look around me, I heard a sound like that of a distant sigh; but it might have been only the night wind soughing through the treetops, or it might have been only my own fancy. At length I dared to look towards the house; but all was darkness, or at least so it seemed. Then I noted that I stood on a different place from that on which I had been standing when I had parted from the woman the night before, and it might be that some angle hid the window I had seen then.

I therefore crept along the brushwood until I reached the same place, and then my heart gave a great bound. There, half hidden by the tree I had climbed, was a light shining from the window.

In a minute my ghostly fears vanished, What was the meaning of it all I did not know, but I determined that I would find out before the night was over. It is true I called to mind some of the things I had read in the writings of Master Will Skakespeare, as well as passages from the Holy Scriptures, all of which spoke with certainty concerning those who possessed familiar spirits; but these influenced me not one jot at the time. The light shone from the window as it had shone the night before, and in all probability the same old man occupied the room.

I therefore went swiftly across the open space towards the tree I have spoken of, and before one might well count twenty I had climbed to the branch whereon I had aforetime rested, and so again obtained view of the chamber. This I did because I feared to seek admission without taking precautions. If others were there as well as the old man, I might have to adopt methods different from those I should make use of if he were alone. I reflected that if what the woman Katharine Harcomb had told my

father were true, and that the king's marriage contract were hidden in the house, he would guard it carefully. It was of too much importance to treat lightly. What I did, therefore, must be done warily, neither must I foolishly and with youthful wilfulness be led to betray myself.

As I have said, therefore, I again climbed the tree, and obtained a view of the chamber, and ere long saw the old man seated at a table, and by the aid of a lamp was reading some scrolls, which he had spread out before him. I watched him a few moments in silence, noting the eager look upon his face, and the evident ardour with which he sought to understand the writing on the parchment before him. Presently I saw him take certain powders from a drawer, and place them in a pot, into which he also poured some liquid. This done, he placed the pot on the fire, and watched the liquid with great care.

It was at this time that I determined to seek entrance. But how? I knew that every door was securely bolted, every window barricaded. If I was to enter, therefore, it must be by strategy. If the woman had obtained admission the previous night there seemed no reason why the door could not be opened to me. But what were the means she had used? I called myself a fool for not following her, and thus learning the means she had used; but that was futile now. Wisdom after a thing has happened is generally foolishness, and so I ransacked my brains in thinking of what she must have done.

I have not set it down in these pages, but I did remember the previous night that, when the woman drew near the house, I heard a noise like the cry of a screech-owl. At the time I put it down to the night bird, but now it occurred to me that it might have been a means whereby she obtained entrance. At any rate, it could do no harm, and therefore I slid silently down the tree, and made my way to the great door, where the woman had entered.

I must confess to a fast-beating heart as I stood by the great iron-studded door. After all, I knew nothing of what I should see within the walls, and the very mystery made every nerve tingle, while there came to the eyes of my imagination pictures of many strange doings. So strong was this feeling upon me that I stood still, scarce daring to

move. Then I saw in the moonlight what had escaped me in the early morning. A piece of string hung by the postern of the door. Indeed, I believe that it had not been there then. What did it mean? On closer examination I saw that it was passed through a hole in the woodwork.

Scarcely realizing what I was doing, I tugged at the piece of string, and immediately I heard a kind of clanking noise within. This, although I might have expected some such result, startled me so that I cried out almost involuntarily.

A minute later the clanking ceased, and then silence reigned again. But now that I had once tugged at the string, and no harm had happened to me, I pulled it again, and then, using what powers of mimicry I had, I cried out as I had heard the screech-owl cry among the trees around my old home.

Again I listened, and this time I heard cautious footsteps. I judged then, as I know now, that the footsteps were muffled, nevertheless there was something very weird in listening to the stealthy tread of some one creeping nearer and nearer to me. A minute later I knew that some one stood at the other side of the door. I heard some one murmuring, and then another silence followed. I waited I should think a minute, but no further sound came, whereupon I again repeated the cry of the night bird. At this, I heard the clanking of chains and the shooting of bolts, as though the one within were preparing to open the door, after which there was again a moment's silence as if he hesitated.

"Are you prepared to pay the price of entrance?"

The words were uttered in a hoarse whisper, and at that time they seemed to contain some occult meaning, so that for a moment I hesitated to reply. But I summoned up my courage, and made answer also in a hoarse whisper—

"I am prepared."

Then the great door began to creak and to slowly open. Knowing how much depended on my speed of action, no sooner was the aperture between the door and its lintel a few inches wide than, putting all my strength against it, I forced it back, and found myself inside the building before he who had opened it had been able to obtain a glimpse of me.

CHAPTER IX

FATHER SOLOMON AT BAY

SO sudden had been my movement that I had caused the old man to stagger back, nevertheless he did not lose his footing, and when he caught sight of me, I thought I detected a desire on his part to rush through the open doorway. So, before he could take any such action, I closed the door with a loud noise—a noise which resounded through the great lonely building,

I could see that my entrance had astonished him. That he expected some one else was evident, and from the look in his eyes I knew that he had no knowledge nor suspicion as to who I was. He held a small oil lamp on the level of his head, by which means he caused its light to fall directly on my face. I saw, too, that his keen deep-set eyes rested on me as though he would read my thoughts, and I judged that he was at a loss how he should treat me.

"And so you would use your brute strength to enter the house of a lonely man, who desires only that he may seek to do the will of God," he said slowly, and I could have sworn that he was seeking to measure my strength and was calculating whether it would be wise to throw himself upon me.

I do not know why it was, but for answer I only laughed. Perhaps this was because the old man's voice had driven away the last vestige of superstitious fear.

"You are young for your trade, young master," he continued, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed on me, "and if my old eyes do not tell me falsely, you are ill fitted for it. Your face tells me that you should be an honest youth, not a roystering and lying housebreaker and highwayman. So leave me at once. I have naught of which you can rob me. Gold and silver have I none. I am simply a harmless old man who seeks to spend the rest of his days in communion with his thoughts and his Maker."

"Your age hath taught you but little wisdom, if it hath taught you that I am a footpad," I said. "Neither do I seek gold or silver."

"Then what do you seek?" he asked with a snarl.

"A quiet hour with you."

I saw him glance quickly around the entrance hall of the house in which we stood, as though he feared we were not alone. Then he took a step nearer to me.

"A quiet hour, young man?"

"Ay, a quiet hour."

"I tell you this," and his voice became bitter: "If you do not leave this house—nay, nay." He stopped as if to correct himself. "A quiet hour—ay, a quiet hour, that you shall have, young master. So quiet that you shall not even know when it hath come to an end, so quiet that the spirits of the dead which haunt this house shall scarcely know when you have entered their worshipful company."

By this time I saw that he had recovered from the surprise he had experienced at my entrance. His deep-set eyes rested steadily upon me, and he spoke like one in deep thought. I therefore watched him closely, for although he was an old man, he showed no sign of feebleness. His eyes were keen and alert, and he moved with the activity of youth.

"But why wish you this quiet hour, young master?"

"To know many things which you can tell me," I answered boldly enough, although I was anything but light hearted.

"Ay, I will tell you of many things," he said quickly, "things that you will never repeat, my son, never, never, never."

He repeated the word as I have written it down with great solemnity, and for the last time between his set teeth and with terrible intensity.

"Did you take advice from any man before you sought admission within these walls, young master?" he went on. "Did you commend your soul to your Maker? Did you bid good-bye to all you hold most dear?"

"I did not do any of these things, Father Solomon," I answered as jauntily as I could.

"Thus you show your foolishness."

"That is as may be," I made answer.

"And what do you think will be the end of this visit?" he asked, and I thought his interest was growing in me.

"The end, Father Solomon?" I replied with a laugh.

"The end will be that you will tell me what I wish to know, and then we shall say good-bye."

"You are but a youth," he said solemnly. "You are yet only on the threshold of life, therefore it grieves even me that you should be cut off before your prime. And yet I see no chance of your escape. You have entered the region of the departed dead, you have lifted to your lips the goblet of which lost souls drink. Still, I would save you if I could. If you will take the oath that I shall prescribe, an oath to the Prince of Darkness who reigns here, then may I be persuaded to allow you to depart without injury."

The man made me shiver as he spoke, but I had not come hither to be frightened before my work was begun. So I summoned up all my courage, and laughed in his face.

"You laugh!" he cried angrily, "but in an hour from now you shall hear only the laughter of devils. The only words of comfort that you shall hear shall come from the lips of hell-hags, who shall drag you deeper and deeper down into the caverns of darkness."

"Have done with this, Elijah Pycroft," I said quietly, for his threat made me feel that he was uttering only gipsy cant.

He started as I mentioned his name, but still he kept up the part which I believed he was trying to play.

"Come, power of darkness, and seize him," he cried, like one invoking some distant being; "tear his soul from his body, and drag it into eternal gloom!" Then turning to me, he said in a hoarse whisper, "Listen! do you not hear them coming? Fly ere it be too late."

"Let your powers of darkness come, Elijah," I said quietly, "but I tell you this: before they come there are certain things you will have to tell me."

"What things?" he snarled. "Tell me who you are? Tell me what you want?"

"All in good time," I said confidently, for by this time I began to enjoy the situation rather than to fear it; "but before I tell you aught let me go to your workshop, Master Elijah—the chamber where you keep your grinning skulls and your witch potions. For I have a great desire to enter

that chamber. Ay, you must have rare doings there! Last night you received pretty women, and to-night you receive not women, but a man with a sword and pistols in his belt. Ay, and the pistols are loaded, Master Elijah, and I am a fair marksman."

"Very well," he said after a moment's thought. "On your own head be the curse of your acts. But wait here for one moment. I will e'en go and prepare the room for your coming."

"Nay, nay, we will go together," I replied. "I love your company so much that I cannot bear the thought of your departure."

As quietly as one could think, he had blown out the light, and I heard him rush away into the darkness. Had I hesitated a moment I should have lost him, but a ray of moonlight having penetrated the place, I was able to follow his movements. I caught him by the arm, and held him fast.

"Unhand me, or you shall die!" he cried.

I held him at arm's length and, although he was an old man, I shook him, not so much as to hurt him, but enough to make him feel that he was not in the hands of a maid of eighteen.

"Do you not fear me?" he cried. "Do you not know that even now I hear the footsteps of the dead?"

"I do not fear you," I said, "but you fear me. Come, Master Elijah Pycroft, who hath been dead and is come to life again, lead me to the room where last night you received the woman called Constance."

He stood still, but I felt his body trembling.

"If you will not," I went on, "I shall begin to threaten. And, mark you, although you pretend to pity me as an ignorant boy, I will perform my threats."

"Ay, and what can you do?" he snarled. "In a minute from now the hell hags which I have summoned from afar will be here, and then—ha, ha!"

"Before they can come I will e'en drag you through the Pycroft woods," I cried; "ay, and I will drag you to Folkestone town, and then, methinks, we shall see gay doings, Master Pycroft."

I meant what I said, for although I desired much to have

quiet speech with him, he had angered me by his obstinacy and his threats. I think he felt this, too, for he said sullenly—

"It shall e'en be as you say."

"Then light your lamp again, Master Pycroft, or Father Solomon, whatever you may be pleased to call yourself," I said.

A minute later the lamp shone again, and then he ascended a broad stairway, I keeping close at his heels and ready for anything he might attempt to do. But he walked straight on. I think by this time he also had become interested to know more about the venturesome lad, whom he had not succeeded in frightening, and who had dared to hint that Elijah Pycroft had never died as had been given out to the world. Be that as it may, he uttered neither snarl nor threat as we threaded the long corridor through which he led me, and ere long we had entered the room of which I had taken such note the night before.

A candle still burnt here, which threw a ghostly light on the walls. I detected a strange odour coming from the fireplace, which, as I imagined, arose from the pot I had seen him put on the fire.

I closed the door behind me, and looked quickly around me. My nerves had now settled down to their normal experience, and, although I knew not why, I was enjoying the situation more than I can say. I knew, however, that I had need of all my wits, and that I must use great caution if I would obtain that for which I had set out.

The added light of the lamp to the candle made the room bright, and, noting that curtains hung by the window, I drew them across it while the old man gazed at me in wonder.

"I wonder that one so old and wise as you does not exercise more caution," I said quietly.

For a minute neither of us did aught but gaze at each other. He doubtless trying to recall some fact which might give him some clue to my identity and tell him why I had dared to come hither, while I noted his every feature, and wondered at the strange life he led.

He was clothed in a long loose flannel gown which hung from his shoulders to his feet, and which was confined to

his waist by a cord. Altogether it was a kind of monkish attire. On his feet were shoes made of cloth, the which enabled him to walk almost noiselessly. He had never been a tall man, and now that age had somewhat diminished his form and his head had sunk low into his shoulders, he appeared what he really was, a shrivelled up old man, though hale and hearty withal.

Presently I thought he listened keenly, as though he expected the approach of some one, and once I thought he seemed on the point of crying out.

"I think it will be well to forget all about the witches and powers of darkness," I said quietly. "I can assure you they will not come. Rather let us talk quietly together."

I longed to know what was in his mind, but his face became blank as I spoke, so that I could read nothing.

"Well, ask your question," he said; "it will not be long now."

"Very well," I replied, "I will ensure our being undisturbed."

I had noticed an old iron bolt in the door, also a stout staple driven into the doorpost. I therefore quietly bolted the door.

"There," I said, "if the witches come it will take them time to get in."

He seemed more than ever discomfited at my coolness. He had been so long undisturbed that he seemed to wonder at any one daring to come to him in such a way.

"Well, what do you want to know?" he said helplessly. Then he added, "But let me tell you this: I know nothing."

"Who is this woman called Constance?" I asked.

At this his face became relieved. "Ha! ha!" he cried. "A lover, eh? He traced the fair Constance hither, and now his love makes him so brave that he dares to meet the ghost of Pycroft. But Constance is not for you, lad. She hath her duties as a wife—eh, a wife!"

"Wife or maid, who is she?"

"How do I know? I who—who——" here he relapsed into silence.

"But you will know before I leave this room," I made answer. "Also, you will tell me other things."

"What other things?"

"Among them, why you live here, and what you hide here."

"And if I will not tell you?"

"There is an old adage that a wizard is ten times worse than a witch, and many a witch hath died during these last twenty years. When King Charles comes to England it will be easy to prove that an old man at Pycroft Hall hath a familiar spirit."

"King Charles!" he cried, and his old eyes sparkled. "Am I afraid of King Charles? I will claim a secret audience with King Charles, and in two short minutes King Charles will obey me like a child."

"Obey you?"

"Ay, obey me. Now, then, do your worst. Fool that I was to be duped by a puling boy like thee, but since I have been a fool, I will e'en pay for it. Thou canst tell thy story—ay, thou canst drag me to Folkestone town. Well, what then? Suppose the ignorant fools which inhabit this countryside cry out for my death? Well, listen—I am Elijah Pycroft—a gentleman, and I can claim to have an ear of the king. And then it will be even as I say. Even King Charles will do the will of old Elijah Pycroft."

He had cast aside all his claims to the supernatural, and had become the clever scheming old man.

"I know what you mean," I replied quietly. "But the thing by which you think to obtain the mastery over the new king doth not exist."

He started to his feet like a man bereft of his senses.

"Doth not exist? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I have seen the mother of Lucy Walters," I replied.

"Thou hast seen——!" he stopped suddenly, his deep-set eyes darting angry glances at me and his body trembling with passion.

"Ay, I have seen her; but it is no use. Do you think that Charles Stuart would ever wed such as she?"

"But he did, he did!" he cried, carried away by his passion. "And what is more, I have proof of it—and——" Again he ceased speaking suddenly. I saw that he had said more than he intended. Now this was the point to which I had aimed to bring him, and I tried to take him further.

"A vain boast," I said. "Where is it, if it exists?"

"Where you will never see it. But stay, tell me who you are? By what means did you obtain knowledge of these things?"

"I have seen a man having a wondrous likeness to Sir Charles Denman," I replied, drawing a bow at a venture.

"Ay, and he sent his pretty Constance to me. He thought to befool me with his ill-thought-out plans—me who learnt wisdom before he was born. Ay, and you saw the pretty Constance too, did you? But she hath told you naught, no—she hath told you naught. How could she? He did not know, she did not know, and you, you do not know."

He laughed like a man in great glee; nevertheless I saw that his eyes were full of fear. Twenty years before he would have been a strong resolute man, whom it would have been difficult to bend, but now age had dimmed his powers and made him incapable of grasping wide issues.

"If you know where it is—tell me," I said, making a false step, as I knew before the words had escaped my lips.

"Ah, now I see why you have come! Ha! ha! What fools men are! You think crowns are played for with plans no weightier than boys' dice, do you? Oh, I know what I know."

"So do I," I said, trying to bluff him.

"And what do you know?" he questioned eagerly.

"Since you are so chary of imparting knowledge, so will I be," I said quietly. "Doubtless you are an old player, Master Pycroft, therefore you know it takes two to make a game. Besides, great enterprises are dangerous when they are taken alone."

"Ah, like Sir Charles, you would go into partnership with me. And I laugh at him, laugh at him! Oh, I have more at stake than you know, young master. Therefore think you I make terms with a nameless boy?"

"I think you will," I replied.

Again he stared at me incredulously. I could see that he was wondering who I was and how much I knew.

"My armour is invulnerable," he cried, "invulnerable, I tell you. You may do your worst, but I can gain the ear of the king, and then—pouf!—what can you do?"

"In two days the king may land at Dover," I replied. "What is to hinder me from going to the king, and saying to him, 'Sire, an old man who lives at Pycroft professes to have proof that you married Lucy Walters: by this means he hopes to have power over you.' What do you think the king will say? What will he do?"

His eyes burned with mad anger, but he saw that I was on guard; he saw, too, that I was young and lithe and strong.

"But you would not do this?" he cried.

"Why not?" I asked quietly.

"But what could he do?" he asked almost helplessly.

"That depends," I replied. "If the thing is true, he will take summary measures with Master Elijah Pycroft. He would know that the proof of such an event would throw the country into civil war. Lucy Walters' son lives at Paris, and if the marriage can be proved he is the next heir to the English throne. But what would that mean? You know, Father Solomon. Besides, think you that James, Duke of York, would be idle? Then let us suppose the thing is not true. Do you think Charles Stuart would take no steps to punish the man who gave birth to such a lie?"

He sat with his chin resting on his chest for some time without speaking. Occasionally he would take a furtive glance at me, and again he seemed to be trying to understand the bearings of what I had said.

"Would you do this?" he asked again presently.

"When one can do a thing, there is always a danger that he will," I replied.

Again he gave me a searching glance, and again he seemed to be trying to see his way through a difficulty.

"Tell me what interest you have in all this?" he said presently.

"Oh, I am a young blood on the lookout for adventures," I replied.

He saw that I had not answered him fully, and it was not difficult to believe that he suspected me of having an interest in the matter which I had not revealed to him. After all, a man would not come to him in such a way as I had come without sufficient reason, and it was not likely

that he would reveal to me a valuable secret simply because I had asked for it. On the other hand, he had seen that I was not to be frightened easily, nor to be put off with a weak excuse. I had done what others had not dared to do I had entered a house of evil omen at a time when others would not dare to approach it. For although through my father's training I had been able to make light of the stories I had heard, there can be no doubt that tales such as I have told about Pycroft were believed by both gentle and simple alike. More than one house in England was tenantless at this time because of its ill fame, and tales of the appearances of the departed dead were believed in by both clergy and people alike. Such Catholic priests as were in England taught people to believe in such things, while even the Puritan and Presbysterian clergy gave credence to belief in the power of the devil and his emissaries. For years Pycroft Hall had been neglected and avoided; and thus it was no light matter that I had dared to try and penetrate its secrets, and I doubt not that the old man weighed these matters well, as he furtively glanced at me from beneath his overhanging brows and shaggy eyebrows.

At last he seemed to have made up his mind to something. He rose suddenly to his feet, gazed furtively around the room as if he even suspected that some one might be near, and then came up close to me.

"Let us understand each other, young master," he said.

"That is well," I replied, as I waited for him to proceed.

CHAPTER X

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

"I AM not sure," he said, "that you are not a youth worth considering. I am not sure, I say. There are not six people in England who know my secret, not one who knows it fully; but among those who do there is not one that I would go hand in glove with. But you may be of a different order. You may be, but I have not made up my mind. It may be," and he looked furtively around him again, "it may be that I shall make short work of you, and that your

father and mother, if you possess them, may have to mourn the untimely loss of a promising son."

I laughed quietly, as though I were amused, but as I did so I had a sense of uneasiness as to what was in his mind.

"Oh, you laugh, do you?" he snarled; "but wait a little, young master, and you will see that you have nothing to laugh at. Not that you are not a youth of courage. I do not deny that. Nay, more: for one so young you have some sense. I saw that at the start, else you would not be alive now."

Again I laughed; partly because the laugh seemed natural, and partly because I was anxious to impress him with the fact that I had no fear of him.

"I tell you the truth," he cried angrily, "and I bid you not to provoke me too far, for I am somewhat short of temper. There is more than one who has dared to brave me here, and have never been heard of again. What, you defy me! Look. If I put this handful of dust," and he took a small packet from a drawer which contained perhaps an ounce of brown-coloured powder, "I say, if I put this handful of dust in that pot, you would in three minutes be asleep—asleep, ay, with a sleep like unto death. And then what would your swords and pistols avail, my young bantam?"

"Methinks if I fell asleep so would you," I replied, "so we should sleep together, Father Solomon, and perchance I might awake as soon as you."

"But think you that I have not other potions, potions which would resist the action of the fumes which would arise from the pot?"

"Possibly; but let me tell you this, Father Solomon: before the sleep mastered me I would give good account of you."

I spoke like a man deadly in earnest, as in truth I was, for his words had made me feel that my position might be more serious than I had imagined. My earnestness impressed him too, for he turned somewhat hurriedly to me and said—

"Have I not said that you may be a youth worth considering? But, look you, before we go further into this matter I must know with assurance how we stand. For,

let me tell you this : if you play the game which is in your mind it will not be for boys' stakes. Neither will it be a game easy to play."

At this I was silent, for I did not wish to use a word which might give him the mastery over me.

"And so, young master, before I tell you the things you are longing to know, I must first know who you are, how you came to know of me, how you fell in with Lucy Walters' mother, and how much you know of the matter which brings you here."

"If I told you these things you would be but little wiser," I replied ; "besides, I may not tell them till I know who you are, and whether it is worth my while."

"How old are you ? "

"But twenty-three."

"You might be older than that," and I saw a twinkle in his eye. "Let me speak plainly, young master. It is long since I met a youth of twenty-three with so much sense."

There was so much of wheedling in his voice that I was put on my guard again. What he had failed to do by threats he would accomplish by flattery.

"One need not be young to be a fool," I replied.

He darted another angry glance at me, and then seemed on the point of uttering a savage threat. But he mastered this desire, and with a shrug of his shoulders he said—

"Bah ! we are playing at see-saw. Let me understand. You came to me with a desire to know certain things. You would know first more of the woman whom you name Constance, then you would know more of the man who sent her here. That springs from young blood and a boy's heart. But that is not all. There is the man's brain as well as the boy's heart to be considered. Let me think of that. You, like others, have heard the story of the king's marriage, but, unlike others, you have been able to locate the place where the secret is kept. You desire to possess it. Why ? Because, like a thousand others, you desire to have power over the king. How came you to find out this place ? What is the purpose you have in your mind ? You will not tell me. Nevertheless I shall find out. What is your name ? Well, for the present one name will do as

vell as another. So far so good. Now, then, for the other ide. Here am I. Who am I? Ah, who knows? Elijah 'ycroft once lived here. Some say he died and was nuried. But was he? If he was, who am I? Am I Elijah Pycroft come to life again? For years this old ouse hath been shunned as though it were the house of estilence. Why? Witches' revels are held here, dark leeds are done here. Spirits of darkness haunt this place. But then men have come here through the day and found ought. What then becomes of the old man who haunts t through the night? Who is he? Who is he? Ha, ha! Thou art a bold youth to come here. But, come, let us o business. Thou art a brave youth, and thou art not vithout a smattering of wit. Still thou art but a boy with . boy's rattlepate."

He seemed to be talking to himself as much as to me luring the latter part of his soliloquy. Evidently he was imply thinking aloud, and trying to understand our rela- ions more clearly.

"Now, then," he went on presently, "you want me to ive you certain information, and you want to put your and upon that which might change the history of the ation. I have given you credit for some wit, young naster, but do you think I am such a fool as to tell all his to a nameless boy, because he dared to break in upon ny privacy?"

"Well, what would you, Master Pycroft?" said I, for saw that he had sense on his side. If a bargain was to e made it could not be all on one side. My work was to earn all I could from him, without placing my future in is power.

"I would know this. First, your name and history. econd, the reason which led you to come hither. And hird—nay, that is all. Answer me those fully, and you vill have answered all I wish to know."

"And if I do?" I responded. "What shall I gain?"

"That for which you have come," he replied eagerly.

"How do I know? Suppose I tell you what you ask, nd you have sucked the orange dry—what then? Can be sure you will tell me what I want to know? The onfidence must be mutual, Master Pycroft."

"You have called me by name. Therefore what is the to tell you further?"

"How do I know that you are Master Pycroft? H do I know that you are not some other man, one perh a thousand times more dangerous?"

A ghastly pallor came over his face as I spoke. F the first time I had made him fear me. Rightly or wrongl it came to me that he was not Elijah Pycroft at all, b a man who greatly feared his name becoming known.

"If I am to tell you who I am, tell me who you are I replied. "If I am to tell you how I was led to believ that you have in your possession the king's marria contract, you must tell me how you got hold of it. I am to tell you how I learnt to know anything about t woman you call Constance, you must tell me what yo know of her, ay, and the reason why the man believed t be Sir Charles Denman hath such power over her."

"And if I will not?"

"Then several courses are open to me. You have t me I have some wit. Well, I can use that wit. I ca find out who the man is who comes to this room during t night, while during the day he is not to be fou here."

"Who's to tell you?"

"Perhaps Father Rousseau, who hath a little church a Boulogne," I made answer.

Again the ashy pallor passed across his face, and I s him tremble.

"He—he doth not know a word of English—that is how do you know there is such a man?"

I know he would have given much not to have spok these words, but they had escaped him while under influence of the words I had spoken.

"Enough to say that I do know," I replied, "an moreover, I am not the only Englishman who can spe the French tongue."

He saw he had taken the wrong road, and he sought retrace his steps.

"Let us understand each other," he repeated.

"Methinks we are understanding each other with gre haste," I replied. "Mark you, I wish to use no ha

methods, otherwise I could easily make many things known to King Charles when he lands at Dover."

"And yet you speak angrily," he cried. "I am an old man, and cannot bear to have an enmity towards any man. I would live peaceably. Besides, my heart goes out to you. Let us act as friends. But I cannot tell you what you want to know without knowing who you are."

"I will tell you this," I replied: "I seek not to harm you. You have a secret; that I know, and I can see my way to finding out that secret."

"But you will not—you must not!"

There was terror in his voice, terror in his eyes, as he spoke.

"Look, look; we will act together. I saw you were a youth of courage and wit the first moment I cast my eyes on you. You are of gentle blood, too. You would not break a promise—that I know. You would stand by a bargain, too. Oh, you would, I know you would. Would you not?"

"If I make a bargain I will stand by it," I replied. "If I make a promise I will keep it."

"Even in the face of death?" he replied.

"A gentleman doth not break a promise because of the fear of death," I answered. "He will keep to it under all circumstances, unless the man to whom he hath made it hath forfeited his right to have the promise kept."

"Ah, then, look here, look at me, straight in the eyes—that's it! If I tell you what you wish to know you will promise me this. First, you will not seek to discover anything more about me. You understand that? You will not try and find out who I am, where I spend my days or my nights. You will say nothing about me to man, woman, nor child. If you hear aught at any time or at any place of the old man who hath been seen under strange circumstances at Pycroft, you will say nought, nor show by sign of any sort that you have ever heard or seen him."

"Well go on," I replied, as he kept his eyes on me, and waited as if for an answer. "Tell me the other things you wish me to promise."

"You must also promise me that whatever advantage can be gained by what I shall tell you shall be shared by

me. Look you, I have the marriage contract—that is, I know where it is. It is all in order. It has the signatures of Charles Stuart, of—of—well, the woman who was called Lucy Walters, and that of the priest whose name you mentioned. I know where it is, and besides me there is no other who knows it. You must not ask how I obtained it. But I know. I know where I put it. It is in a safe place. But if I tell you, you must be my friend. In the time to come I shall need a friend such as you, with a quick brain and a strong arm. You know French, you say?"

"Yes, I know it enough to speak, and to understand the speech of others."

"That is well. You will promise these two things?"

"Let us be clear," I made answer, for I knew that he had not been speaking idle words. I could see by the way his hands trembled, and by the eager gleam in his eyes, that he was deeply in earnest. "You wish me to promise not to learn the secret of your life, to seek to know nothing more about you than I know now?"

"Yes, yes. Nothing, nothing. That is vital."

"And, second, you wish me to promise that whatever advantage may be gained by what I shall find out shall be shared by you?"

"Yes, you state it clearly."

"The first I might promise, but not the second."

"Why?"

"Because you could not share in that which I desire. I desire neither favour nor position at the hands of the king—only justice. This could not affect you. Stay! if I gain my desire, you should never want a home or a friend."

"Neither favour nor position!" he said like a man in astonishment. "A secret like that, and demand neither riches nor honour!"

"Neither," I replied.

"Then what would you do with your power?"

"Justice," I replied.

"You would seek to place the—the boy on the throne?"

"If he is the king's lawful son, yes, when his father dies."

He grasped my hand eagerly.

"But you would do nothing without consulting me first. You must promise that."

"But I might not abide by your counsels."

"Oh, I fear not that. If you come to me before you take action—all will be well. You will see the wisdom of my words."

"Yes, I would promise that," I said slowly, for the full meaning of what I was saying was not clear to me.

"That is well—that is well!"

He spoke like a man from whose shoulders a burden had rolled, and I judged that he was mightily pleased.

"But remember," I said, "in return you promise to tell me what you know of the woman Constance who came to you here last night, and you also promise to place in my hands the marriage contract of the king with Lucy Walters."

"That is, I will take you to the place where it is. I will share with you this secret. And in return you will seek to do justice, justice! And you will do nothing without consulting me. You will also be my friend, and will seek to shelter me. And you are a gentleman. You speak only the truth, and you keep your promises."

The whole question had been settled so easily that I wondered at my good fortune. I had told the man nothing, and yet he had promised to give me the information I coveted. In truth, so easily was my work accomplished that I feared lest I had pledged myself more fully than I realized. And yet all seemed straightforward. I had touched the old man's fear, and he had yielded. His great dread was that I should discover his secret, the secret of his name and identity. Well, what were his name and identity to me? Then I had promised to befriend him. That was more serious. It might be that in making this promise I had undertaken more than I knew. And yet all might be simple. I believed that he was afraid to make use of the secret he guarded, and that he was eager to obtain the services of some one like myself. Besides, nothing could be obtained without risk, and I had made my promise.

He moved the pot from the fire, and then threw some dry wood upon the smouldering embers.

"The night is cold, although summer is approaching

fast," he said. "Besides, it is well for us to be warm and comfortable. You will drink wine with me. No? Ah, you fear. You are cautious for one so young, but it is well. We shall need caution as well as courage. There, the fire flames. Draw up that chair, good youth, and let us talk in a friendly way. Our skirmish is over, and we have arranged a truce. Nay, more than that, we have agreed to fight on the same side, and I am content. Do you know that for three days following I have dreamt that I shall have a youth, brave and strong and wise, like you, who shall be my friend? Well, I took every precaution before taking you into my confidence, but now I believe you are the fulfilment of my dream. But it will be easier for us to talk if we each have a name. You can call me Father Solomon; what may I call you?"

"You may call me Master Roland," I made answer.

"Master Roland. Ah, it sounds well. It brings to me memories of great courage, great wisdom, and great fidelity. Master Roland; but Master Roland what?"

"That is enough. Master Roland and nothing else."

"Ah, very good. A sagacious youth. Ha, ha!"

His tone had changed. He evidently desired to be friends; he even regarded me with an air that was almost affectionate. I could have sworn that my presence was in accord with his strongest desires.

He sat on one side of the fire, and I on the other—he with his head sunk between his shoulders, and his long beard almost resting on his knees; I alert and watchful, for as yet I had no confidence in him. Around the walls of the room were strange mystic charts, while on the table were grinning skulls and much peculiar apparatus, of the meaning of which I knew nothing.

"I will e'en drink some water of life," he said, filling a goblet from a bottle which stood on a shelf. "Ah, it warms my blood and cheers my brains! That is well. Now I will tell you the thing you desire to know."

He gave me a keen furtive glance as he spoke, but I simply nodded my head and waited for him to proceed.

"You would know more of the fair Constance," he said. "That is natural. She is fair of face, and hath a sweet

voice ; but, Master Roland, take my advice and seek not her company. You cannot help her. She is in danger of her life, and a price is set upon her head ! "

" What hath she done ? " I asked.

" Many things. She is the daughter of Master John Leslie, who is the bosom friend of Master Hugh Peters, who was friend and chaplain of Oliver Cromwell. Master John Leslie hated the late king more than any man in the kingdom, and took a principal part in the beheading of Charles. He is a great Independent, Master Ronald, and he gave his daughter in marriage to Sir Charles Denman, a man old enough to be her father, but who is also a great Independent, and who fears as much as he hates the thought of the coming of Charles II."

He hesitated here, and looked towards me as if he expected me to speak, but I held my peace, for I knew he was only at the beginning of his story.

" Do you not know the rest ? " he asked.

" No," I replied, ' I know nothing."

He heaved a sigh like one well satisfied. " Ah, thou art a simple youth after all," he said ; " thou knowest nought of what hath been taking place."

" Well, tell me," I said sharply, for I grew impatient at his slowness.

" Oh yes, I will tell thee. It is a part of the bargain, and I will tell thee. When it was known that General Monk seemed to favour the coming of the new king, Master Leslie, Sir Charles Denman, and his wife conceived a scheme for the murdering of Monk. They believed they would be doing good service. They knew that if Charles came back, in spite of all the promises he might make, it would go hard with those who took part in the death of the new king's father. The question was, who was to do the deed ? The presence of Master Leslie or Sir Charles Denman, men known to hate the royalty, would destroy any chance of success. So they settled upon the wife of Sir Charles, whose person was unknown either to Monk or his retainers. Well, the plan was carried out, Master Roland ; that is, the attempt was made. The woman, never dreaming of disobeying her husband and also mad with fear as to what should take place if Charles Stuart came

back, attempted the deed. If Monk was killed, Lambert would have power—you follow, Master Roland? Oh, it was not a bad plan, and had it succeeded—well, methinks there would not be at this moment a gaping crowd waiting to welcome another Stuart. But it did not succeed—that is, not fully. Mark you, she did succeed in reaching the room where Monk lay asleep. She stabbed young James Carew, who acted as Monk's secretary, ay, and so badly that he hath not yet recovered; but Monk awoke before she was able to harm him much. Oh, but she made a desperate fight. She wounded Monk in the arm, and fled. Moreover, so cleverly had she arranged everything that she managed to escape, and although every attempt hath been made, she hath not yet been captured."

"But how dare she ride abroad?" I cried.

"That woman would dare anything," cried the old man. "Besides, Monk described a woman different from the beautiful Constance. You see, she had taken steps to alter her appearance before she attempted the deed. Nevertheless, the thing hath been traced to her. Master John Leslie is even now in disgrace, while spies be everywhere trying to track down Sir Charles Denman and his wife. Not that guilt hath been proved against Sir Charles on that count, nevertheless his life is not worth ten groats."

"But how dare he ride to the *Barley Sheaf* while it was yet daylight?" I cried. "I saw him myself."

"Sir Charles hath many friends; besides, what kind of man did you see?"

"A tall strong man with an iron-grey beard and a grey ashen countenance; one who speaks with a rough harsh voice."

"Sir Charles hath a yellow beard, brown hair, and hath a sweet mellow voice," he replied. "Ay, but he is cleverer than any play-actor in London. Besides, he knows that just now the search is somewhat lax, seeing that every one is at Dover waiting to welcome the new King."

"Then—then——"

"Ah, more I may not tell you. Ay, and seek to know no more, Master Roland. The chase cannot last long: she will be taken, and then God have mercy on her!"

"And Sir Charles?"

A cloud crossed his face, and that harsh cruel look which I had seen in his eyes when first we met came back.

"Who knows?" he snarled. "Who knows if he—— but enough of that, Master Roland. There is something of more importance. There is that for which you came hither; your fate, and perchance mine, depend on that."

CHAPTER XI

THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER

"YOU want the king's marriage contract," he said presently; "you desire the proof that Charles Stuart was married to Lucy Walters, and thus be able to prove that the boy who is now with the king's mother is the next heir to the English throne?"

I nodded my head in the affirmative, all the time watching the old man's eyes, into which a cunning sinister expression had come.

"It is a great thing, a great thing," he cackled. "Fancy, the Duke of York would give his fingers to get hold of it. And yet only you and I have the secret of it."

"Only you at present," I urged.

"Ah, yes, only I, only I; but I need you, and you shall know. Ha! ha!" and he laughed like a man tickled. "But we must bide our time," he continued presently.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It is no use removing it from its present hiding-place until the proper time," he said. "Suppose you had it in your hand now. What would you do with it? Would you go to the king, and say, 'Look, here is the marriage contract between you and Lucy Walters'? Such would be the act of a fool. And you are not a fool—no, you are not a fool!"

"But I must know where it is," I cried, "and I must be assured that the thing is not a hoax."

"Ay, that you shall," he replied; "come with me."

He rose, took a candle in his hand, and made his way towards the door.

"Whither?" I asked.

"To the hiding-place," was his answer, and he gazed anxiously around the room.

Even in those days I possessed a fair amount of caution, and thus, while I unbolted the door, I kept close to him, so that at no moment should he be able to betray me.

Outside the door, he stopped and listened. Even in that lonely place and at that awesome hour, he seemed apprehensive lest some one should spy upon our actions. But he had no need to fear. All was silent as death. The house was empty, and every sound that we made echoed and re-echoed through the empty chambers.

"All is well," he said as if to himself, and then he led the way down a flight of stairs which I had not hitherto noticed. Presently we came to a dark cellar, which I saw was hewn out of the rock. We were now among the foundations of the house, and my heart beat fast at the thought that I was near placing my hand upon the precious document which my father declared would make my fortune.

"Who could find us here, Master Roland?" he cackled again; "not one in fifty. But Old Solomon is wise, and he does not live at Pycroft Hall for nought."

Whereupon he held the candle close to the floor, as if searching for something.

"Do you see anything?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Think you there is aught beneath here?"

"Beneath here? No, we are already in the bowels of the earth."

"Ah, that is good!" and again he cackled like a man well pleased with himself.

Presently I saw him pressing the ground hard with his heel, and then, as if by magic, there opened close by my feet a dark aperture.

"Descend," he cried, "descend!"

"We will go together, Father Solomon," I made answer.

"Ah, you do not trust me. A good youth, a cautious youth."

Still holding the candle in one hand, he came close to the dark hole in the ground, from which came a musty ill-smelling air, and then he put his left foot into the hole, while I held his right arm.

"That is well," he said, and then I saw the rungs of a ladder.

One, two, three, four steps he went down, until I was almost dragged into the darkness in my endeavour to hold him fast.

"Come, come, Master Roland; but mind, it needs a brave heart."

I confess it here, I hesitated before following. How it may appear to those who read this I know not, but at that moment I seemed to be in a ghastly dream. Everything had become unreal to me save the shadow of a great terror. The old man, with his head sunk between his shoulders, was such a creature as only comes to one in a nightmare; the king's marriage contract existed only in the wild imaginings of foolish men. A thousand dangers suggested themselves, nameless dangers, and therefore all the more terrible, and try as I might I could not keep from trembling.

"Afraid, Master Roland, eh? Ay, and well thou mayst be, for this hole is full of lost spirits. Hark! do you not hear them?"

In the excited state of my imagination I fancied I heard distant wails, and I felt my blood run cold.

"And yet only yesternight the fair Constance took this road, and she was not afraid."

He said this tauntingly, which caused anger to take the place of fear. I still held his right arm, the hand of which grasped one of the staves of the ladder, and his words made my grasp the tighter.

"I will come with you, Father Solomon," I said; "but mind, if you betray me, I will send you to hell with all your sins upon your head."

With that I placed my foot upon the ladder, but in so doing I had to relax my hold upon him. I heard him cackling to himself while he went farther and still farther into the darkness.

I had not descended more than six steps before I heard a noise above me, and then I knew that the trap door which had lifted was closed again, and that in all probability the secret of its opening was only known to the man whose breath could be distinctly heard just beneath me.

As may be imagined, I lost no time in going down the ladder, and the moment my feet touched the ground I grasped the old man's arm again.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed. "This is rare sport, eh? Do you know where you are? 'Twill be a fine tale to tell Charles. Ten fathoms underneath the foundations of Pycroft Hall, with Father Solomon! Do you think you'll ever see daylight again, Master Roland?"

"If I do not you will not," I replied; and then I looked around me and found myself in a narrow tunnel, which perchance was three feet wide and high enough for a man of short stature to stand upright.

"Good boy, courageous boy, well he deserves to get what he seeks! But oh, he will see rare sport before he puts his hand upon the king's marriage contract."

"Where is it?" I asked, still holding his right arm.

"I must be free, and you must follow me."

"No," I replied. "Whither you go I will go. And I shall not loose my hold upon you till I see daylight."

He looked at me savagely, and lifted his left hand, in which he held a candlestick, as if to strike me. Then the angry look passed away, and I saw the cunning leer come in his eyes again.

"A good boy, a brave boy," he said coaxingly. "Ah, we are friends. I cannot do without him, neither can he do without me. Youth and age, strength and wisdom together, what can withstand it?"

He led the way along the tunnel, which I followed, still holding him fast. How far we went I could not calculate, for although the time seemed long, it might only in reality have been short. At length, however, we came to a broad place, such as I have been told miners make underground when digging for mineral.

"The time and the place, Master Roland," he said; "now let us search."

He held up the candle, and I saw that all around me were dark roads leading from the cavern where we stood. Whither they went I knew not. I seemed like a man standing on a place where many cross roads met, only we were in the bowels of the earth, and the roads seemed to lead only into greater darkness.

"A grand place to bury a secret, eh? Anything would be safe here, eh? But there is nothing hidden that shall

not be revealed. There is nothing done in silence but shall be proclaimed on the housetops."

He placed the candle in my hand, and then began to peer cautiously around the sides of the cavern.

"Ah!" he said at length. "You wanted to see, and you shall see. Lucy married Prince Charles—no, King Charles—and Lucy gave the contract to the priest, and the priest gave it to old Father Solomon, and old Solomon waited—waited till his dream should be fulfilled. Do you know this place, Master Roland? Once upon a time miners digged here for gold. Oh, it was ages ago. Whoever dreamed of gold being found five miles from Folkestone? They dug and dug, and dug! They are dead, but their work lives. Fancy those old men digging here ages ago. But they left a grand hiding-place. Only one man knows the secret of these caverns. I, old Solomon. The man who is left alone here never sees the light again. Ha, ha! But it is a fine place to die!"

Presently he seemed to have discovered the place he sought, and then he took the candle from my hand. I saw a dark hole in the side of the cavern, into which he put his hand, and from which he drew a black box.

"You wanted to see it, and you shall see it," he said. Then he pressed a spring in the box, and the lid flew open.

"Read! Read!" he cried.

I saw a piece of parchment which was emblazoned with a rude tracing of the Lion and the Unicorn. This he took, and with trembling fingers unfolded it.

"Read! Read!" he cried again.

It was written in French, but in such a crude fashion as to make it difficult to read. But I saw these words—"Marriage Contract between Charles Stuart, King of England and Scotland, and Lucy Walters, of Ros Martat, in the County of Pembroke, Wales, daughter of Richard Walters." After this there were many lines which seemed to be meaningless, but at the bottom of the page I saw writing by other hands. I saw the words—

"Charles Stuart, By the Grace of God King of England and Scotland.

"Lucy Walters.

"Pierre Rousseau.

"François Abelard."

I saw, too, that Pierre Rousseau was stafed to be a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, who had performed the sacrament of marriage, and that François Abelard, a brother of the Benedictine Order, had witnessed thereto.

"There, you have seen it; now let me put it away."

"No," I replied, "let me read it again; I would commit the writing to memory."

He paid no heed to me, however, and before I well knew what he was doing he had struck the paper from my hands. The box closed with a snap, and he placed it in its hiding-place again.

"You have seen," he cried. "Oh, it is rare fun. Now, then, you must swear to what I dictate, or you will never again see the light of the sun."

"Swear what?" I cried, for I felt angry with myself for having allowed him to put the thing back into its hiding-place.

"You must swear that you will obey me in all that appertains to this."

"That was not in our bargain," I cried.

"But it must be," he cried. "Swear, or you die."

"No," I said, "I will not. And do not think to frighten me. I will keep to my bargain faithfully, but if you in aught do fail on your part, then will I come hither alone, and I will act without you."

"Ah!" he cried, and there was a fearsome look in his eyes. "You defy me, eh?"

"Yes, I defy you!" I cried, for the sight of the parchment had set my blood on fire.

We had moved away a few steps from the place where he had put the black box, but I kept my eye on the spot, so that I might know it again.

"Ah, we must be friends," he said wheedlingly. "Come, my son, I have more to tell you."

I followed him a few steps, and then again I looked back over my shoulder to mark the place where the precious document was hidden; but this, as will be seen, led to my undoing, for no sooner did he note my action than with a sudden wrench he leapt from me, and blowing out the candle he left me in utter darkness.

I stretched out my hands to grasp him, but he was

gone. I stopped and listened to catch the sound of his retreating footsteps, but could hear nothing to guide me, for the place seemed to be full of the sound of footsteps, now coming from one direction, and now from another. Moreover, he wore cloth-soled shoes, which made but little noise, so that I was utterly unable to locate him. Presently I thought I heard him cackling, as I had heard him more than once before when he was well pleased with himself. Without an instant's delay I rushed to the spot from whence I thought the sound came, but only to strike my head with a terrible thud against the rocky side of the cavern.

What happened after that I do not know. I have a vague remembrance of falling to the ground, and then rising and staggering away in the darkness, but whether this was only fancy or fact it is not for me to say, seeing that nothing was clear to me.

Presently, when I awoke to consciousness, I found myself lying in the darkness. Not a ray of light came to me anywhere, neither did I possess any means of kindling one. My head ached, and my whole body was racked with pain. How long I had lain there I knew not, neither was I able to calculate. All I knew was that I was in as sad a plight as any man could be. But I determined not to give up hope. If there was a way into this place there must also be a way out, and so I set to work to try and find out my whereabouts. I was not long before I touched the side of the cavern, close to which I groped until I came to an opening.

"This will lead back to the house," I reflected, and buoyed up with this hope, and keeping my hand by the side of the tunnel, I followed its windings for some distance, only to come to a sudden stop, for I found that the place ended here. I therefore returned again, determining to enter each level in turn until I should again find my way back to the man whose wits had been keener than my own.

The second tunnel was shorter than the first, and ended in the same way, so again I returned to the large cavern, and keeping ever to the right hand, so as not to enter any one of them more than once, I again groped along in the darkness.

Even then I tried to find the place into which the old man had put the black box, but in this I was unsuccessful. Had I a light, I felt sure I could have found it, for I had marked the place carefully; but, as I have said, I was in utter darkness, neither had I means of obtaining light.

After a time I was wellnigh despairing, and I felt sure that old Solomon intended the place to be my grave. The more I tried to find my way out, the more confused I became. Still I was young and strong, and youth does not for long give way to hopelessness.

Of the thoughts which passed through my mind, or of the plans I made, as well as of the schemes of vengeance I meditated upon I will not speak, for while they were doubtless natural, they had so little of sense in them that they are not worth recording. Only one plan, indeed, promised aught, and that was to lie still until old Solomon came to seek me, as I felt sure his curiosity would compel him to do. But that was given up, for, as I reflected, it would be terrible to lie there in the cold and in the darkness; besides, he would doubtless wait until lack of food had so weakened me that he would be able to work his will on me.

I therefore continued to examine each level or tunnel in turn, and in this I had to manifest great care, for there were many pitfalls which might easily lead to a man's death. How long I remained in the darkness I know not, neither for that matter do I care to dwell upon the endeavours I made while there to find my way to the light, for even now, after the lapse of years, I shudder to think of my sufferings during that terrible time. For if there is one thing harder than another to bear, it is to be alone in black darkness such as I was. I have faced death more than once, I have experienced imprisonment in a noisome evil-smelling cell, I have had to stand face to face with dread alternatives; but at no time do I remember such utter despair as I felt then. And this any man who hath imagination can easily believe. For I had no other prospect than a slow death amidst darkness and loneliness. Could I have heard human voice, I do not think I should have minded so much; but nothing could I hear save the echo of my own sighs, while the darkness was so great that it could be felt.

Moreover, I presently grew faint and weak. I needed food sadly, while even worse than hunger was the thirst that presently gat hold of me. My body grew stone cold, and yet my throat became parched and burnt.

"This must be hell," I thought to myself. "I am become like the rich man in the New Testament—ay, I am worse than he, for I cannot see one afar off to whom I can cry."

Presently, however, in spite of my suffering I fell asleep, and when I awoke I felt better. My head ceased to ache, and although I felt very weak my tongue had become cool again.

"Thank God," I cried out in my joy. "O, great Lord, who didst suffer for the sins of the world, be pleased to help me in my dire distress."

But no answer came to my prayer: only silence, a great and terrible silence, filled the place. Nevertheless, my prayer gave me hope. If God lived, I reflected, I was in His keeping here in the bowels of the earth as truly as if I was above ground. This feeling put new heart into me, and I determined to make another effort.

I had now no knowledge concerning the levels I had explored, but I kept on praying for guidance, and ere long I found myself in another tunnel, although whither it led I no more knew than a child but last night born.

I could not help reflecting, however, that the air grew purer, and presently I put my foot in a pool of water. Giving no time to reflection as to whence this water came, I knelt down and took a long deep draught, and immediately I felt a new man. A great confidence possessed me, the hideous time which I had been passing lost much of its terrors, and while I was still in black darkness, I felt sure I was moving towards the light.

I therefore pressed onward, feeling the air grow purer and purer at each step, and then I fancied that, instead of gazing into black darkness, I saw a darkness that was grey. I held my hand before me, and thought I could see my fingers move. This inspired me with still greater hope, and after a time my hope became a certainty. I could even see the sides of the tunnel in which I walked. A few minutes later a streak of light, very small but very distinct, reached me. I realized, moreover, that a little stream of

water trickled along the bed of the tunnel in which I walked, and ere long I saw what appeared to me to be a small hole which let in the light.

At this time my heart filled with a great joy, and in spite of my weakness I shouted aloud for joy. I bethought me of the psalms which I had heard the Puritans sing : "*Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron ; they fell down and there was none to help ; then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distress.*"

Never surely did man thank God as I thanked Him then, and when, a little later, I crept out of the level through a hole scarce big enough for a man to drag his body through, I could scarce breathe for very joy. I heard the birds singing, and looking above me I saw the sunlight piercing the leaves of the trees. Then I think I fainted, for I remember falling down, while all became dark again.

When I awoke I found myself lying where I had fallen, and although I was terribly weak I had still strength enough to look around and take notice of my surroundings. I saw that the mouth of the level out of which I had come was closed by a great heap of fallen débris, save for the hole through which I had passed. It was much overgrown too, and a man might pass it a hundred times without seeing it. There was another thing which struck me also. Not a footmark of any sort was to be seen, not a suggestion that any one had visited the place. Huge heaps of stones and rocks were around, but they had become overgrown by bushes and trees. The place seemed far away from human habitation.

"Father Solomon knows nothing of this entrance," I reflected, "and he believes that he left me there to die. Well, all the better ; the time may come when I can make use of my knowledge."

After making careful examination, I rose, and found my way slowly from the place. I took what I believed was the seaward direction, and after walking wellnigh a mile through a wood, I saw a cottage among some fields. It was with much difficulty that I reached it, but I succeeded at length, and presently saw a peasant woman lighting a fire outside the cottage door.

"What's o'clock, good dame?" I asked.

"Six o' th' mornin'," she made answer.

"Then perchance you can give me some breakfast," I said.

"I've nothing but milk and bread," she answered, looking at me suspiciously.

"For which I will pay you well," I replied, taking a coin from my pocket.

The sight of the money altered her behaviour with wondrous quickness.

"It's all ready," she replied. "Th' milk is boilin' and the bread be in the dishes. My man will not be here for a minute or two, but there's no need for you to wait, young master."

Hunger made me ravenous, and I gave no thought to others. I doubt not the bread was black and heavy, but the milk was sweet, and I partook of it greedily.

When I had finished it seemed to me as though my strength had come back to me as if by a miracle.

"Will ye 'a' more, young master?"

"Presently, presently;" and I gave her the coin I had promised.

"Ah, here be my man comin';" and I noticed a farmer's man come up, who looked at me wonderingly.

It was at this time that I realized the condition of my clothes. They were covered with dirt; and catching reflection of my face in a bucket of water, I saw that it was much bruised and smeared with blood.

"I will have a wash, good dame," I said, "after which I would like to talk with you."

"Ay, and 'ere's water, master," she said; and I washed myself while she looked on in silence.

CHAPTER XII

THE COMING OF THE KING

"SERVANT, sir." The man saluted me as he spoke, and moved a step nearer.

"Thank you for a good breakfast," I said. "I have been out all night, and lost my way among the woods."

"Easy enough to do," he replied, nodding towards the great forest from which I had come.

"To whom do they belong?"

He shook his head. "Pycroft woods," he added presently.

"And no one lives at Pycroft Hall, I suppose?"

"No one but the devil."

"I saw great heaps of stones in the woods."

"Ay, it is said there was a great mine at one time."

Beyond this the man could tell me nothing, though I asked him many questions. I also made inquiries in a roundabout way concerning Pycroft Hall, but he only shook his head. Evidently he knew nothing of it. I also asked him concerning the day of the week, and I found that I must have been full thirty hours alone in the bowels of the earth. I concluded that old Solomon had not come to seek me, neither did he believe that I should be able to find my way out.

After a time I felt sleepy, and the woman having offered me a bed whereon to rest, I fell into a sleep, from which I did not awake until past noon. After the dame had given me a meal consisting of boiled bacon and potatoes, I felt strong enough to walk back to Folkestone, which, after giving the woman another coin, I did.

I found that my absence had caused no surprise at the *Barley Sheaf*; indeed, the news that the king was to land at Dover the next day but one seemed to drive all other thoughts from their minds. I made many inquiries, but could hear nothing of either Sir Charles Denman or his wife. The woman had come mysteriously into my life, and had passed out of it again just as mysteriously. And yet I thought much of her. I felt in a way which I cannot explain that my life was linked with hers, and that some time in the future I should see her again.

The following morning I had my horse saddled and started for Dover. I had much company on the way, for, as it seemed to me, the whole country-side had emptied itself in order to be at Dover to welcome the new king. When I arrived at Dover town, moreover, I found a great uproar; in truth, no fair I had ever seen provided such food for sport and carnival as Dover town provided that day. In the inns and taverns there was much drinking, while, in the street, booths and shows were everywhere

in evidence. On every hand the people were shouting and singing. Every street was festooned with flowers and flags, while it appeared that every one was glad that the reign of Puritanism was over, and that they would have a king instead of a parliament to reign over them. I noticed, too, that in the booths there were plays representing the downfall of the Puritans, while the great butt of most of the jokes were those who dressed in the dark sober fashion of the times of Oliver Cromwell, and quoted psalms with a pious sniffle.

"God save His Most Gracious Majesty King Charles the Second!" many cried.

"Ay, ay," was the response. "We shall have a merry life under the king. Plenty to drink, plenty to eat, and plenty of fun."

"Down with the psalm-singing hypocrites!"

"As though cock-fighting, dog-fighting and bull-baiting hath not always been an Englishman's sport."

"The King loves it, I hear."

"Ay, and he loves to kiss a pretty girl, too."

"Well, what's the harm in that?"

"None at all. He's young and comely, and loves his pleasure as a king should."

"It'll go hard with the sour-faced psalm-singers, I hear."

"Well it ought. Did they not kill the king's father? I hear that at least five hundred are to be hanged."

"But what about the Act of Oblivion?"

"Marry! as though the king will care aught about the Act of Oblivion. The thing is, the country will be able to enjoy itself."

"Well it ought. After a man hath been to church once a week he's done enough religion. After that let him enjoy himself."

All this and much more I heard as I passed along the streets; in truth, much of what I saw and heard is not fit to record here, for many of the people might have just been let out of Bedlam, so little did they seem to care for what was clean and decent. Moreover, no notice was taken of these things. There was neither law nor order, while, if some man should say a word rebuking them for wrong-doing, he was immediately pounced upon as a

sour-faced Puritan. Such was the difference which was already manifest, even before the new king had set his feet on English soil.

It was now the twenty-fourth day in May, and many reported that they had seen a number of vessels bearing the king's retinue far away at sea, but that he would not arrive until the following morning, as he desired to enter the town, not when the people were tired and dusty, but as they appeared after a night of rest and sleep, and when their finery was not bedavered by a day's jostling.

I remembered that my father had told me he intended being in Dover on the twenty-sixth of the month, but I imagined that he would make diligent inquiries concerning the coming of the king, and would surely be in Dover before it was too late for him to offer his welcome.

I therefore made my way to the *Fox and Hounds*, which I found to be very full of people, and for a long time I was unable to gain any answer to my inquiries, but I discovered presently that not only had Master Philip Rashcliffe been to the inn, but he had also left word for me, in case I should call, to wait for him in a private room which he had hired.

I followed the servant to this room, and, being left alone, was about to review the events which had taken place since I had left my home a few days before. Apparently I had accomplished nought, but really I had accomplished much, especially if there was truth in what old Father Solomon had told me. Although I have said nothing concerning it here, I had thought much before returning to Folkestone without again seeking out the old man and accusing him of treachery. I reflected that it would be best for him to think of me as dead, for if I went to him he would take other steps for hiding the precious document, and then all through which I had gone would be in vain. Only one thing tempted me to go back to Pycroft Hall and again descend into those dark regions underground, and that was the dread that he had treated the woman called Constance as he had treated me. But, although the thought fretted me sorely, the more I reflected, the stronger was my conviction that she had left the house by some other means.

It was late in the evening before my father returned, and then he greeted me as though we had been separated for years, instead of a few days.

"How fares it with you, Roland, my son? You look pale, and there is a bruise on your forehead."

"My hat covers the bruise, father," I replied gaily. "As to my pale face, it will be quickly ruddy again."

"But tell me, hast thou done aught?" he said anxiously.

"As to that, I have much to relate, father, but whether it will end in aught of advantage you shall speedily judge."

I therefore set to work and, as clearly as I could, told him of much through which I had passed since the day I left him. For a long time he spoke no word, either good or bad, concerning what he had heard, and even when he broke the silence it was only to ask me many keen searching questions, the which I found difficult to answer, for I had not thought of many of the meanings which he attached to what had happened to me. Nevertheless, he seemed well pleased with me, and admitted that I had acted with much wisdom and caution. Concerning the black box, which lay hidden in the cavern beneath the grounds of Pycroft, he pondered long, so much so that I thought he forgot the dismal condition I had been in when old Solomon had left me there alone.

"Thou hast done well, Roland," he said, "so well that I have no advice to give thee save this. When thou dost appear before the king, do not parade thy knowledge oversoon."

"I appear before the king!" I cried.

"Ay. That must be."

"But how?"

"I may be able to help thee in this; but if I cannot, thou hast a clever head and must make thine own way. And another thing: if ever thou dost see Dame Walters again, see to it that thou dost tell her nothing."

I looked at him questioningly.

"Never trust a woman more than you must," he said quietly. "The best schemes in the world have been frustrated by women. The truth is, she knows not how to hold her tongue."

"But it seems to me that you have gained knowledge

of this through a woman—through Katharine Harcomb," I suggested.

"Ay," he replied slowly and thoughtfully; "but women must be managed. When dealt with by wise men they can become useful, even as Katharine Harcomb became useful. Perhaps in the future you will be brought into contact with women; well, never be impatient with them, and always keep the mastery over them."

"But how came Katharine Harcomb to come to you with her news?" I asked. "How came I to be commissioned with this work?"

"You will know some day," he replied; "it is nought of great importance, but you shall know. The great matter for us to consider now is how you are to gain the ear of the new king."

"What have you in your mind?" I asked.

"That I will not tell you," he replied. "A man is made, not by having things done for him, but by doing things himself. For myself I care but little for the future, but you are young, and life is before you. Well, I shall leave your future mostly in your own hands. You have shown me that you have courage and brains. With knowledge such as yours, you ought to do much. Even if the king is unmoved by that knowledge, the king's brother would give much to possess the thing of which you have told me. But you must be wary; and you must be careful not to try and pluck your apple before it is ripe."

I looked into his face, and tried to understand the thought behind all this; but I could discover nothing. His face was like a mask which hid the thoughts which I felt were passing through his mind.

"There will be gay doings to-morrow," I suggested.

"Ay, gay doings—gay doings. The old order of things hath come to an end in a day. Yesterday England was still Puritan; to-morrow it will be—God only knows what. To-day the same people who, a little while ago, were shouting 'A free Parliament!' are crying 'God save the king!' Bah! but we must be wise, Roland, and you must win both fame and riches, or I shall be sorely disappointed."

"What do you mean, father?"

"I mean that no man can be trusted, and every man must look out for himself. In a week from now England will be changed. The theatres which have been closed will be opened, and there will be a new order of the day. Cromwell wanted to make England the land of God. With him religion was everything. He wanted to make England pious by law. Thus his cry was ever, 'We must have men of God in all our public offices.' With Charles all will be different—ay, I know him, and all will be different. The devil will be let loose to-morrow—that is plain enough. The poets will write poetry of a new order, pure waters will be made puddle, and pious language will be made putrid. It's plain to be seen. Why, it hath begun to appear in Dover even to-day. Evil is already naked and is not ashamed, and filthiness crieth aloud. Well, Roland, methinks you have your hand upon power. You must use it, but you must use it as one who hath gentle blood in his veins."

"I do not like all this," I said at length.

"Do not like what?" asked my father almost roughly.

"I do not like the motive which is to prompt my deeds," I made answer. "If it were only that justice may be done, then there is reason; but to use my knowledge to squeeze favours out of the king is not acting the part of one who bears the name of Rashcliffe."

My father started as though he had been stung.

"Ay, and what would you, Roland?" he cried. "Kings rule through fear, and I would only obtain justice by the same means. I have been robbed—thou hast been robbed. I know these Stuarts, and I shall never get back mine own save by making the king or his brother feel that he will do well to listen to my behests."

"Do you believe that what I saw is the real contract of marriage between the king and Lucy Walters?"

"Ay, I believe it."

"Then that lad, James Croft, is next King of England?"

"He should be."

"Then let us understand," I said. "Suppose by this means we obtain from the king all we desire? Suppose

he gives you back our lands, and a place in the nation's life, are we to keep quiet concerning this thing?"

My father was silent for some time, and then he said, "Roland, thou art but a boy yet. There is much to be done. But thou must see the king, and thou must go to the king's Court. Meanwhile thou hast thine hand on the secret of power, and every wise man uses his power wisely."

And that was all he would say to me that night, which, as may be imagined, puzzled me much. Nevertheless, I slept well that night, and was only awakened by the jangling of bells, and the shouts of a mighty multitude.

My father had already risen and gone out, and so, no food being yet obtainable, I also left the house and went towards the sea. I found a great concourse of people on the sea shore, who were watching with great eagerness the ships which lay quite near to land. Never did I witness such rejoicing before. One might have imagined that the man who was in the royal vessel outside had done some wondrous deeds for the nation, and that we wanted to welcome him back, even as the Romans of olden time welcomed back their great conquerors, who were followed by the trophies of their warfare.

Many thought the king would land early in the morning, but it was not until noon that the boat which was to bring him ashore touched the sand, and then it seemed as though the shouts of the multitudes would rend the very heavens.

As fortune would have it, both my father and I obtained a place close to where General Monk stood, and so we were able to view the king's landing. I took but little note of the others who accompanied King Charles, for I was eager to see the man who was to be the new ruler of the nation, and as I looked I saw that he looked older than his real age, which was just thirty years. His face was deeply marked, and that in spite of the fact that he was of full habit. I noticed too that he was very dark, and that a very black moustache grew on his upper lip. His eyes were small, and what some men might call sleepy-looking, but every now and then they flashed, just as I have seen a serpent's eyes flash when aroused from its sleep. He watched the shouting multitude, not with the

glad look that one might have expected, but with a kind of mocking smile. Indeed, he seemed far more interested in a very small dog that he carried than in the greeting of his subjects.

When he put his foot on the shore, however, and a great shout went up from the multitude, he bowed and smiled pleasantly, and it was then I saw wherein his fascination lay, and so much moved was I that I shouted with the rest, at the which I saw my father, who was close by my side, regard me with an amused smile.

After the great shout of welcome, a signal was given for silence and then General Monk came forward, and welcomed him with all possible marks of reverence and love. But even although silence was commanded, the enthusiasm of the people was so great that I could not hear all General Monk's words. But I could not help noting, even although this great man had welcomed the king with such evidences of loyalty, that he seemed to be only playing a part. He seemed to despise the plaudits of the multitude, even as the king did as he gazed over the sea of upturned faces.

"Here, your Majesty, you see the love of a devoted and loyal people."

This was the conclusion of General Monk's speech, the former part of which was, as I have said, drowned in the sea of voices.

Again the king smiled, a smile that was half cynical and bitter, even although he seemed pleased at his reception.

"I thank my people, General," he said, "and in truth I blame myself for not coming back before, so glad doth every one appear at my coming."

But no man seemed to note the meaning which lay at the back of his words, nor to think of the time when this same king was hunted like a fox throughout England, for they started to shouting again like men possessed. And this was seen not only among the common people, but among noblemen and gentlemen of all sorts.

After this the mayor of the town came forward, and offering him his welcome, also gave him his white staff of office, which the king returned with a pleasant smile.

"You govern the town so well, Master Mayor, that I will not rob the people of such good service," he said with a smile, whereupon the people shouted again, although they did not seem to know why they were shouting.

Then the mayor, who looked very elated and joyous, presented the king with a very gaily and beautifully bound Bible, saying as he did so—

"In the name of your loyal citizens, I do humbly offer your Majesty a copy of the sacred Scriptures, which we possess through the learning, the piety, and the gracious goodness of your most learned and sacred grandfather King James the First of England."

At this the king smiled again, and receiving the Bible, which he afterwards gave to one of his retainers, he said, "I accept this gift with great thanks, Master Mayor; among all things which I love in the world, I love the Bible best."

He wellnigh laughed as he said this, but the people, if possible, became more excited than ever.

"He loves the Bible!" they cried. "He is a pious king! God save His Majesty!"

After this he walked with General Monk towards a canopy, under which he stood talking with his nobles. It was at this time that I realized how keen and penetrating was the king's gaze. For although his eyes seemed to be habitually half closed, he did at times open them wide and look keenly around him. Moreover, he seemed to understand everything at a glance. I noticed also that when the king spoke it was to the point, and that his remarks were weighty with sense.

"I will not stay at Dover," he said to General Monk. "The people have seen me, and that is enough. From what I can gather they love a king more than a protector; nevertheless, it is well that I go straight to Canterbury Cathedral, where, in the interests of religion, I will publicly give thanks to God for my safe return to my people."

"A wise step, your Majesty," said a young man who had stood near the king the whole time.

"Ah, Master Tom Killigrew, I expect you to write a great ode to our landing this day."

"I would that my poor wit were equal to the subject, your Majesty."

"Well, we shall see. Thou hast been faithful in mine adversity, and now we return to gladder times."

"There have been many faithful during your Majesty's adversity. Through all the dark years there have been many who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

It was my father who spoke. Through influences that I knew not of, he had obtained a place for us near General Monk, at the landing, and now through the same means we had followed the king to the canopy.

"Who is this?" asked the king sharply.

"It is Master Philip Rashcliffe," said a voice. "He was one who fought for your gracious sire in the first civil war, and was grievously wounded."

He gave only a passing glance to my father, but fixed his eyes on me, who stood by his side.

"And who is this brave youth? Nay, nay, do not speak for him; speak for yourself, young man."

"My name is Roland Rashcliffe, your Majesty," I made answer.

"The son of Master Philip here?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"A youth of spirit, I should judge," he said, "ay, and well grown too. He pleaseth me well."

Now at this my heart was all elate, for let who will say otherwise, it is no light thing for a youth to be noticed by his king.

"And thou hast come to bid me welcome, Master Roland?"

"Yes, sire," I replied, scarce daring to look him in the face.

"Well, rise; thou hast knelt long enough. And what favour dost thou ask?"

I lifted my eyes as he spoke, and saw a quizzical look upon his face. Nay, it was more than quizzical. He seemed, as I thought, suspicious of my motives in coming, although I knew not why.

I had it on my tongue to tell him how my father had been impoverished by the Puritans, but I only said—

"Nothing, your Majesty."

"Nothing? Then is thy request easily granted. Fancy, General Monk: I have put it in the way of this youth to ask me a favour, and yet he hath demanded nothing Will this be an augury of my reign?"

"I trust so, your Majesty," replied Monk, and I thought. I saw greed in his eyes. "And yet many, although they ask not favour at your hands, will seek justice," continued Monk boldly.

"Ah, how is that? Ay, I remember now. It hath been told me that your life hath been in danger. That a fanatical Puritan woman, a daughter of John Leslie, Constance by name, and wife of Sir Charles Denman, of painful memory, sought your life when you took steps to ensure my coming back to mine own. We must inquire into this. She must be taken prisoner and put to death."

"She hath already been taken prisoner."

"Ah, that is well. Well, we will see to it that both she and those who aided and abetted her shall have justice. Where is she imprisoned?"

"At present in Bedford, sire."

"Ah, that is well. But I will not think of these things now. I must away to Canterbury."

He took no further notice of me; nay, for that matter he regarded none of those who gazed eagerly into his face. Instead, still carrying the small dog, which he seemed to prize greatly, he left the canopy, and made his way to a stately coach, which set out, amidst the continued acclamations of the people, towards Canterbury.

As for myself, I took but little note of the king's departure, while the feeling of joy which had come into my heart at his kind words passed away. Why, I knew not, but the news that the woman called Constance, the wife of Sir Charles Denman, had been put in prison and was doomed to death, drove all other thoughts from my mind, and there and then I did make up my mind that I would save her from such a terrible end.

CHAPTER XIII

AN ADVENTURE ON THE CANTERBURY ROAD

IT is difficult for me to describe my feelings at this time. For while on the one hand I was pleased that the king should speak so kindly to me, I was in a most unaccountable way disturbed at the news of Mistress Constance Denman's imprisonment. So much so that, as I have said, I determined that, happen what would, I would rescue her from prison. Why I should decide to do this may seem to the reader somewhat of a puzzle. I knew but little of her, and even that which I knew was not in her favour. She was the wife of a man who, although calling himself a Puritan, was a hard, unscrupulous man, evidently one who would intrigue against the king, and be a party to murder. But not only this, she was herself guilty of attempted murder, and therefore a dangerous woman. I knew that General Monk had been much hated when he had yielded to the desires of those who sought to bring about the king's return, especially as he was thought to have been a traitor to all the promises he had made. Nevertheless, none but a desperate lawless woman would be guilty of attempted murder, and thus the justice of which the king had spoken was surely merited.

In spite of this, however, I determined to save her. It is true she had treated me with scant courtesy, and although she had told me to wait outside Pycroft Hall until her return, she had never again appeared. Evidently she had left Pycroft Hall only to be taken prisoner, and then conveyed to Bedford. I knew by the look on Monk's face that no mercy would be shown, while it was easy to be seen that the new king would be anything but clement towards the daughter of John Leslie, who had been one of the principal actors in bringing about the death of his father.

Still, I was not changed in my resolution, neither for that matter could I bring myself to believe that she was guilty of the crime of which she was accused. I knew that she was a brave, resolute woman. No one could be with her as I had been and not be sure of that, but her face was not the face of one who could coldly meditate upon and arrange

for murder. Passionate she might be, and therefore in the heat of the moment might be led to do a terrible deed. But she could not plan to do it. Such a scheme as had been described to me must have been brooded over in cold blood, and I could not believe that she could have done this.

I called to mind my first sight of her features, and I felt confirmed in my impression. She was only twenty, and her face was free from the possibility of such a crime. A noble face I thought it was, and even at the time I felt that its possessor was a noble woman.

All this passed through my mind as I stood beneath the canopy prepared for the king, while the multitudes were shouting all around. So much was I occupied with them, moreover, that unlike the others I did not follow his Majesty to the great coach in which he was to ride to Canterbury; but remained there alone, brooding over what I had heard.

"Roland."

"Yes, father."

"Come! we must needs haste."

"Why?"

"Because we will follow in the procession to Canterbury. The horses are saddled. I have seen to that."

"Yes, father."

This I said like one in a dream, for while I had it in my mind that the journey to Canterbury would suit me well, seeing that we should be on our way to London, my mind was so occupied with other things that I paid but scant heed to his words.

A little later we were on our way out of the town, a great crowd following the king, while a greater crowd prepared to remain in Dover, so as to take part in the carousing which had been arranged. On the hill near I saw Dover Castle, which looked stately and grand in the smiling sunlight, while seaward the waters gleamed brightly, as though nature sought to harmonize with the gladness of the multitude. All around the people continued to cry "God save the king!" while guns boomed with a great thundering noise, and bands of music played merry tunes.

"Methinks, this is a great day, Roland," said my father, who rode close to my side.

I did not reply, for my mind was full of the thought of the woman who lay in prison.

"The king seemed pleased with you."

"Ay," I replied, "I trust so."

"Trust nothing, Roland."

I gazed nervously around, fearing lest my father's words should be heard and reported to the king.

"You need not fear to speak, Roland," said my father. 'No attention is paid to us. Besides, there is such a noise that no man can hear you speak, save me, whose ear is close to your mouth. In truth had I a matter of secrecy to discuss I would desire no better place."

I continued silent, first because there seemed nought to say, and second because I thought of other matters.

"I have thought much of what you related to me last night," continued my father, "and I have concluded that you have forgotten to speak to me of many matters."

In this my father spoke truly, for although I had spoken freely concerning my interview with old Solomon, I had said but little concerning the woman whose fate had become of so much interest. Why I had refrained from doing this I know not, yet so it was.

"I have told you all I know concerning the thing I went to seek," I replied.

"Ay, that is so, Roland, and thou hast never told me a lie. But I am convinced of this: That old man never intended thee to die in that cavern."

"No," I replied. "What is your reason for believing that?"

"I have many reasons."

"Then why did he leave me?"

"To return after you had fasted two or three days, and when your strength would be so gone that he would be able to make his own terms with you."

I had not thought of this before, and I wondered at my dullness, for there was sense in my father's surmise, and I fancied there might be truth in it.

"I see gay doings ahead," said my father presently.

"Ay," I replied, for I was thinking of the reception the king would meet in London.

"Never did a king come to a throne under fairer skies," said my father. "He hath come back without conditions.

His will is as powerful as his father desired his own to be. But there will be a terrible time for the Puritans."

"But he hath promised general forgiveness."

"He is the son of his father, and all the world knows wha a Stuart's promises are worth. But never mind, thou hast found favour. See that thou dost make use of it. But ask for nothing yet; throw your dice carefully. But Roland, you must obtain those papers."

Again I looked nervously around, but I saw at a glance that no one paid heed to us.

"I tell you, you must do nothing until they are in your possession."

"No," I replied eagerly enough, for his commands fel in with my mood.

"I can do nothing to help you."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"Nothing. I shall have other things to look after. Bu you are no fool, and you must do it yourself. And mind, never sow your seed until your ground is prepared."

At this I set to wondering much as to what might be in my father's mind, but not, I am afraid, to much purpose, seeing that the noise of the crowd seemed to increase rathe than diminish, especially as we drew near Canterbury.

Arrived at this old city, the king made straight for the Cathedral, and so great was the multitude who desired to follow him that I became separated from my father and then, scarcely regretting the happening, I rode away from the turmoil, and set out for London town with all speed. A full hundred miles lay before me, but I hoped that by hard riding, even although the day was somewhat spent, I should get thither before midnight. My horse had rested for several days, and had been well fed and groomed during the time, and being a creature of high mettle, he responded to the feelings of his rider, and dashed forward at a fine speed. I had not ridden many miles, however, before I noticed that two men were riding behind me, and as I judged were anxious to keep me in sight. At first I took but little note of them, but when I found they kept about the same distance from me, neither losing nor gaining upon me, I began to wonder what was in their minds. About five o'clock in the afternoon I stopped at

an inn, so that I might obtain refreshment for my horse and myself, and also, as I thought, give them an opportunity of passing me. I took my place near the window, so that I might be able to watch my horse and the road at the same time, but although I let nothing escape me, I saw neither of them pass by the hostelry in which I was sitting.

"They must have taken some other road," I said to myself, and when after a few minutes I again mounted, and on looking around saw no sign of them, I was confirmed in my impression. But in this I was quickly deceived, for I had not gone a mile along the road, before I heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and on turning round, I saw these same two men at a short distance from me.

I stopped, determining to have the matter out with them, but the moment I did so they likewise stopped, as if by set purpose.

"Two to one," I said to myself, "and both are armed. It were foolish for me to pick a quarrel." So I determined to outdistance them by hard riding. But here again I failed to succeed for, although, as I have said, Black Ben was young and fleet, I could gain not one yard upon them.

If I galloped they did likewise, and if I dropped into a canter they followed my example. This kind of thing was kept up until I saw the sun begin to sink, and then, seeing a piece of lonely country before me, I began to apprehend an attack

"Two to one," I repeated to myself, and I began to examine my pistols, and to see to it that my sword lay easy in its sheath; but no sooner had I done this than they vanished as if by magic, and I was left alone. Upon this I again gave Black Ben rein, but by this time he had become somewhat wearied by his long journey, so that although I made good speed, I feared to press him too hardly.

A little later, and the night had fallen; moreover my way led through a wood, which made everything dark, so that I had to ride warily. Added to this, I presently approached a steep hill, where I rode slowly so that my horse might take breath. I had scarcely gone half-way up when I heard a rustle among the bushes at my side, and before I had time to draw either pistol or sword, my arms were

pionioned, and I was thrown to the ground with great force.

"Not a sound, not a movement, or I will blow your brains out," said some one in my ear.

I tried to catch sight of his face, but in vain. The woods made the road dark, and as far as I could judge he was closely muffled. Moreover the fall stunned me, and so numbed my senses that I was unable to think clearly. I remember, however, that they searched my pockets, which made me think of them as common footpads, but even when they had done this they did not leave me.

"Have you found it?" said one.

"Not a sign of it," said another.

"But the fellow hath it: we must get it out of him somehow."

"He hath not, I tell you. I've searched him to the skin. This was easy, for the fall knocked all life out of him. He lies like a man dead."

"Surely, we've not killed him?"

"No, he breathes."

"Then ask him where he put it, and threaten to flog him alive if he will not tell you."

"A good thought. I say there—wake up!" and he shook me violently.

By this time my senses had come back to me sufficiently to know that I should learn most by holding my peace. I therefore continued to lie like a man dead.

"I say, you Rashcliffe, speak up. It's to your advantage, man," the man continued.

This, as you may be sure, made me more alert than ever. I was now convinced that these were no common-footpads, but men who had followed and attacked me for a purpose. They knew my name, and they suspected me of having something which they desired. Immediately I thought of old Solomon's words, "the Duke of York would give his eyes to have this thing." Were these men agents of the duke, and had they discovered that I had found out where the marriage contract was?"

"It's no use, Rickmore. He must have struck his head against a stone when we dragged him from his horse. He may lie like this for hours."

"You are sure you've searched him thoroughly?"

"Every rag upon his body?"

"And what have you found?"

"Naught but a little money and his pistols."

"Pull off his boots, it may be there."

I allowed them to pull off my boots, lying limp and inert as they did so; but, as may be imagined, they were again disappointed.

"The fellow hath nought," said the man who had been called Rickmore, "and 'pon my word, I believe he's dead."

"Then Duke James will have to wait."

"Hush, man, some one may hear!"

"Hear!" and the other laughed scornfully. "There's not a living soul within three miles of the place. I say Duke James will have to wait. The thing must be found, but this springald hath it not, spite of the woman's speech."

"Doth the thing exist at all?"

"Exist! You should have seen the look on Duke James' face when I told him what Katharine Harcomb had said to me. 'By the Holy Virgin, Hamilton,' said he, speaking like the good Catholic he is, 'get hold of the young rascal. Never let him out of your sight until you have obtained all he hath found, and know all he can tell you.'"

"Did he say that?"

"Ay he did. I tell you he puts great store on it."

"But the fellow hath it not."

"No, and what is worse we have so nearly killed him that he might as well be dead."

"Well, what are we to do?"

"We can do nought but return to London, and wait for the coming of the king. At all events the king is king, thanks to Monk."

"He's to be made a duke I hear."

"After Denman's wife tried to send him to heaven?"

"Ay, and would have succeeded, but for a mishap."

"Nay, nay. She might have sent him to hell, but never to heaven."

"Well, from all I hear no one could wish to be sent to the other world by a fairer hand. Men have it that when Denman married Master Leslie's daughter, he wedded a face as fair as an angel's."

"Well, it'll not save her from the gallows. Had her

father not been such a Puritan, it might have gained her favour with King Charles, but I hear that the very name stinks in his nostrils. I am told that she nearly escaped but a man rode night and day to Dover to tell Monk that sh had been captured, and was safely lodged in Bedford Gaol.'

"She must be a brave woman. Were she not the wife of such a fellow as Denman I would strike a blow for her deliverance. Bedford Gaol is not a hard place to get out of, for the gaoler not only loves his wine, but will take a bribe. Besides, the woman who tried to send Monk into eternity deserves some help. But say, what are we to do with this young jackanapes?"

"Do you think he's dead?"

"No; he lives, although there's no knowing how much we've hurt him. We dare not let it be known that we've had aught to do with him. Duke James was very careful to tell us that everything must be done in secret."

"Then let him lie, while we make our way to London."

"Shall we take his money? He will think then that we are footpads."

"No, we cannot do that, badly as we need it, After all, a gentleman is a gentleman."

"Nor his horse? It is a good one."

"Nay, that might tell tales. Besides, we are well supplied; let us on to London. A good night's rest to you, Master Rashcliffe."

"With apologies for delay."

"And a curse upon you for not having what we wanted."

I heard them laugh as they mounted and rode away, as though they were pleased with themselves. For some time I did not move; I thought it would be wiser to keep up the part I had been playing, for fear they might come back. Presently I heard the sound of horses coming towards me from the Canterbury road, and this led me to get up with all speed, and to call Black Ben to my side. A few minutes later I was again on horseback, but little the worse for my happening, although sore vexed with myself for being mastered so easily. Still, I had learnt something. I was not the only one who was trying to obtain Lucy Walters' marriage contract, while my father was not the only one to whom Katharine Harcomb had

spoken concerning the thing. Moreover I had been confirmed in my information concerning the prison of Mistress Denman, neither did I fail to take note of what was said about the gaoler.

On the whole, therefore, I was not ill-pleased with the night's events, and possessed no very bitter feelings towards either Master Rickmore or Master Hamilton.

Nothing of importance happened further to me that night. As I drew nearer London, I found the people talking much about the gay doings which were to take place when the king came back to his loyal city, as well as the terrible punishments which would be meted out to all who in any way took part in King Charles' death. I did not stay in London longer than I could help, however, for, foolish as it may appear, I determined to ride to Bedford, and if possible deliver from prison the woman who had been my companion to Pycroft Hall but a few nights before.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW I SAW A MAN WHO BECAME FAMOUS!

THE night was falling fast as I entered Bedford town. I put up at an inn called *The Bull*, although I found the place given over to drinking and revelry, because I had seen enough coming through the streets to convince me that there was not an inn that night in the town that was in any better plight.

It was some time before I was able to obtain an ostler to feed and groom my horse; at length, however, I succeeded in so doing by the promise of extra payment, and then having satisfied myself on this score, I found my way to the inn again, in the hope of supper. But in this I found great difficulty. Drink was plentiful enough, but something to eat was a different matter. Every one in the house seemed too busy in supplying drink to those who came hither to drink the king's health to be able to care aught for the needs of a traveller such as myself. At length, however, I obtained some boiled beef and bread, and with this I had to be content, and after partaking thereof I found my way into a room where I was told the people of quality had congregated.

Little notice was taken of my coming, until it became known that I had come from London town, after which I became a person of great importance, and was plied with many questions. These I answered freely enough. First because my answers could arouse no suspicion, and second because I thought I should thereby lead my questioners to talk about the woman who was imprisoned at Bedford Gaol. In this I found I had conjectured rightly, and when, presently, I found that one of those who talked with me was no less a person than the governor of the gaol, I rejoiced greatly that I had not accepted the hospitality of Master John Bunyan.

"Ah, but it is a feather in my cap," said this man, whose name I found to be John Sturgeon, "and I doubt not that when all the happenings reach the king's ears he will be mightily pleased with me."

I saw that he had been drinking freely, and that he weighed not his words. Moreover, he seemed to be a man of choleric temper, and did not brook opposition from any one.

"And how may that be, Master Sturgeon?" I said. "Think you the king will have so little to do when he arrives at Whitehall that he will pay heed to the imprisonment of what you have called a Puritan woman?"

"Surely you have not lived in London, or you would not speak so foolishly," he cried. "Suppose, I say, suppose she had killed General Monk, would the king have been welcomed back? I tell you no. Therefore will the king bear in mind all who have had aught to do with the capture of such a one."

"Ay, but," I urged, "the governor of the gaol is not the constable who caught her coming hither?"

"Again, you speak like a fool, young master, or you would know that I am a man of authority in Bedford. Moreover, was it not I who had Master John Leslie watched? Did I not note his looks of uneasiness, and did not the inquiries I made concerning him lead me to place men along the roads to London? Ah, but it was by the merest shave that they took her. For what was she dressed like, think you? As a witch? Nay, but as a saucy young springald. Moreover, she carried things with a high hand, and threatened Jonathan Wild, the biggest constable in Bedford, to

horsewhip him. But her face betrayed her, for one of the men, although she hath lived much in London, and is but little known in Bedford, recognized her in the moonlight, and then having suspicions, pulled off her headgear, whereupon her hair fell down her back."

At this there was much laughter, and many coarse jests.

"Ah, well," went on Master Sturgeon, "I never did like Master Leslie, for he sent many a good fellow to Bedford Gaol, simply because they were not straight laced Puritans like himself. Things are changed now, and mayhap that I shall have even him under lock and key."

"How did she get her horse and her attire?" I asked.

"That I cannot tell," he replied, "but I doubt not it will all come out when she is tried."

"When and where is the trial to be?"

"In London, I do hear. This, I think, is a shame, for why should all the fun be in London. Still the deed was done there, and mayhap the king, who loves a pretty face, may wish to be at the trial."

Although much more was said, there was little of importance; moreover I found that men were too eager to talk of the events which were to take place in London because of the king's coming, to pay much heed to the woman who had attempted the life of General Monk, wife to Sir Charles Denman though she might be.

Still I kept in the room until wellnigh midnight, when Master Sturgeon rose to go. I was told that he boasted of being able to carry more drink than any man in Bedford, nevertheless I saw that he staggered somewhat on leaving the inn. As he put on his hat a plan was suddenly born in my mind, and without weighing its value I followed him into the street, determining to make my first attempt that very night to obtain the liberty of the woman into whose company I had been so strangely thrown.

CHAPTER XV

MASTER STURGEON, THE GAOLER

MASTER STURGEON had walked but a few steps when I came to his side.

"I am a stranger in Bedford, Master Sturgeon," I said, "therefore the company of such a well-known man as

yourself is of great interest to me, and if I may, I will e'en walk a little way with you."

"Ah, it is you, Master Stranger?" he made answer, "and you have seen that I am a man of no mean import in the town? Ah, well, you are a youth of great penetration."

"Every one here seems to know you," I said.

"How can it be otherwise?" he said, with half-drunken gravity. "Am I not the father of the town? It is true that many would say that Master Leslie is of greater importance than I, because he is a justice, and because he comes of an old family. But what of that? I am here always and he is only here sometimes. And besides—will not this drag him down, and lift me up? He will say, of course, that Sir Charles Denman egged her on, and not he: that may be true; but why was she on her way to Goodlands, which is the name of Master Leslie's house? You see, she was hardly ever seen at Bedford. None of the family liked the place. Master Leslie came sometimes, and crowed it over people who have made the town, but his wife and children considered themselves too high and mighty to come."

"Master Leslie hath other children, then?"

"Ay, that he hath."

"How many?"

"As to that I know not, for, as I have said, he lived much in London, and was great friends with Old Noll. But when he did come here, he showed what a strong Quaker he was, going sometimes to hear the tinker, and at others to hear Master Gaystone, who is as great a Presbyterian as ever lived. Would you mind taking my arm, young master? My head is clear enough, but I seem to see the road rising up before me."

I took his arm, and continued to ply him with questions, for though he stammered and hiccuped much, he seemed desirous of talking. Moreover, he was not so drunk but that he understood what he was saying.

"And Sir Charles Denman. Know you aught of him?"

"Nay, nothing much. A great friend of Master Leslie's and a bigoted Puritan. A money lover, too, and one, I

am told, who is as secret as an oyster. Men have wondered that a maid so young and so fair to look upon should have married him; but no man can tell what a woman will do."

"Is she, then, so very beautiful?"

"Ay, that she is. When I saw her brought into the gaol, I fairly started. It seemed impossible that one so young and so fair could attempt to murder a man. But there it is, no man may say what these Puritans will do."

"The king may thank his stars he hath such a zealous officer in this town of Bedford," I said, trying to play upon his vanity. "It ought to be made known what a valuable subject he possesseth."

"Ah, you see that! What I fear is that my part will not be mentioned to his Majesty. Why, a man hath been knighted for less!"

"Many's the time," I said; "yet would you believe that, although I was at Dover when the king landed, and although I heard an officer tell him that the woman was captured, your name was never once mentioned?"

"You at Dover! You heard men tell the news to the king!" he cried.

"Ay, and I spoke to the king," I made answer; "but I left him at Canterbury, for I desired to reach London town quickly, having affairs of importance to transact."

"And the king spoke to you, young master! Tell me, did the king speak to you?"

"Ay, that he did," I replied. "Why not?"

My news seemed to startle him so that his voice lost some of its thickness, and I thought he became soberer.

"I fear I have taken liberties with my betters," he said solemnly.

"Oh, as to that I take no account," I replied. "It was not for me to blazon it abroad that I had spoken to the king, or to tell them that he asked me if I desired a favour, therefore you would think of me as you would think of any other traveller coming into the town. Still, I saw that you were a man of authority, and I desired to speak with you."

"Tell me, young master," he said eagerly, "hath the king sent you here? Are you here for anything like statecraft?"

"As to that, Master Sturgeon, young as I am I am old enough to hold my peace on such matters. Only this I will say: I have a stronger hold on the king than many whose names are bandied from mouth to mouth, and a word from me will in the time to come weigh much with him."

"Your name, worshipful master, what might your name be?"

"As I said before, a man doth not shout his name to the people when he hath important affairs to perform," I replied.

"If there is aught I can do for you, young master," he said, "say the word, and John Sturgeon is at your command."

I had measured my man rightly. Vain as a peacock when sober, and a fool in the bargain when his brains were muddled by drink, I saw that I could work my will with him if I played my game carefully.

We were passing by a gloomy building as we spoke, and he noted my interest in it.

"The gaol, young master, the gaol. Would you like to see it? To-morrow I will be at your service, and I will show you, ay, I will show you the beauteous daughter of Master John Leslie."

"To-morrow," I replied slowly: "to-morrow I ought to be far from Bedford, Master Sturgeon; yet methinks the king would be interested to know that I saw the woman safely guarded. As you said some time ago, had General Monk been killed, Lambert would have been master, and then I doubt much if Charles would have been brought back. You say you have no one above you in this gaol, Master Sturgeon? You are the sole master here?"

"Ay, the sole master," he replied with pride. "Any command I make is obeyed. Either in town or county gaol, John Sturgeon is chief man.."

"Then would I visit the gaol, and see this woman before I go to bed to-night," I made answer.

I saw that my request had startled him. Perhaps doubts came into his mind concerning my request. Perhaps never in his life had he a prisoner of such importance. Mostly the people under his care would be thieving vagrants, or perhaps occasionally some low-browed murderer. This

woman, however, made him realize his importance more than ever. She was the daughter of one of the chief men in the neighbourhood, and the importance of her capture was not confined to the little town in which he lived.

"I would rather it should be to-morrow if it please you, young master," he said presently, and I could see that his judgment, muddled as it was by drink, was still sufficiently clear to know that my request was not unaccompanied by danger to him.

"I do not think I need trouble you to-morrow," I replied. "If I desire to see the gaol then, it is probable I shall be accompanied by one of the justices of the town. But to-night all is quiet, and perchance I might be enabled to take back a better report to London than if I saw things under the guidance of a justice."

"Oh, I will see to it, young master," he said hurriedly. "The turnkeys will be either drunk or asleep, but I can open all doors. Come with me. Not but I would rather it had been to-morrow, for the ale was strong, and try as I may I cannot help being sleepy."

He led the way into the gaol courtyard, a small and—as I plainly saw in the moonlight—an ill-kept place—and then proceeded to open the door which led into the building.

The prison was as silent as death. In the distance I heard the noise of those who were still at their carousals, as well as many whom we had passed in the streets. Some were singing the songs which had been composed about the coming of the king, others were quarrelling, while others still were shouting in their drunken revelry; but here all was as still as death. I saw that Master Sturgeon spoke truly when he said the strong ale had got into his head. He fumbled much with his keys, and in truth seemed wellnigh asleep.

"You will speak well of me to the king, young master," I heard him mumble; "ay, and you ought, for there is not in all the realm a more zealous subject of his Majesty. God save the king!"

"How many gaolers have you here?" I asked, my heart beating fast, for now that I had once entered the prison the reality of what I was trying to do came to me with more vividness than ever.

"How many?" he replied solemnly, "not many; besides doth not the king ride to London to-day? And have they not been drinking the king's health, even as I have?"

"And is it not right to drink the king's health?" I made answer.

"Right? ay, that it is. Besides, a sup of ale would make me awake again. Well thought of."

Without even stopping to lock the door behind him, he made his way to a room near the entrance, where after much ado, having lit a candle, he found a jar of ale.

"Jiggins of *The Bull* says he brews the best ale in Bedford," he said, "but this is better, this is better;" and he drank a deep draught.

"Come and let me see the prisoner," I said, for I feared he would soon be too drunk to render me any service.

"Plenty of time, plenty of time," he said sleepily. "Let me pull myself together a bit. Her door is the second on the right, and the key is there," and he pointed to a key hanging on the wall. "I don't like Master Leslie, he hath never treated me as one man of quality should treat another; but I had to put her in the best cell. Oh, she hath a good bed, and good victuals. For what saith her father? 'Nothing is proved against her yet,' he saith, so I had to be careful. But you'll tell the king, young master. It was because of me that she was taken, and—but that ale is good; I will e'en have another drink."

A minute after he sat down in an armchair which stood close to the open fireplace.

"A man may rest in his own room, king or no king," he went on with sleepy gravity. "Besides, am I not the governor? Who dares ask me questions? Even the justices say, 'Ah, we must leave all things to Master Sturgeon.' And they may, they may. The king's most trusted servant—that's what I am. Won't you drink, young master? There's no hurry. Her door is close by, and the key is handy. I always see to that. I always have my own keys for my own use. Ah, Master Leslie will soon know who's master now! The father of Bedford, that's what I am."

I let him wander on. If he had spoken truly there was no need of interruption, for, as some one at *The Bull* had

said, there would be few men in Bedford sober that night. The king had given commands that the people should drink his health, and there was no reason to suppose that they were slow in obeying his royal will. I doubted not that the gaolers had made the most of the king's bounty, even as others had, and if so, there was little fear of being disturbed.

I saw that Master Sturgeon was regarding me in a dazed sort of way, as though he wondered why I was there, but by this time the liquor had got too strong a hold upon his brain for him to think of asking questions. He lay back heavily in his chair, and I saw that he had great difficulty in keeping his film-covered eyes open. A few minutes later he was fast asleep, and I was in Bedford Gaol without a guide to conduct me whither I would go.

Taking the key he had indicated from the nail on which it hung, I made my way out of the room, holding the candle in my hand. But Master Sturgeon paid no heed to me, and to all appearances he would sleep for many hours to come.

Once outside the door, I carefully turned the key in the lock, and then I silently walked along the passages, taking care, however, to make no sound. It was seemingly in my power to set at liberty every prisoner in the gaol, but I thought not of them. All my interest was centred in the woman whom I had accompanied from Folkestone Town to Pycroft Hall. Indeed, I doubt if there were many prisoners to be liberated, for I had heard at the inn that all save those who had committed serious crime had been liberated in order to show forth the king's clemency.

At the second door I stopped and listened. All was silent as death. Not a sound was heard in the whole dark gloomy building. Even the noise of the revellers from the outside did not reach me here. I did not stop to consider the danger of carrying out the plan that had been born in my mind. I did not consider that if I was caught in the act of seeking to liberate Constance Denman my own liberty would be at stake. I was simply filled with an eager desire to look on her face again, to hear her voice, and to give her liberty. All the fears and doubts which haunted me through the day troubled me no longer. The

madness of thus seeking out a woman of whom I knew so little troubled me not one whit. My heart was young and warm, and at that moment the desire to find the king's marriage contract with Lucy Walters was of far less importance to me than to befriend the woman who was accused of trying to murder General Monk.

As I said, I stopped and listened intently. The candle in my hand cast flickering shadows along the gloomy passage in which I stood. The air felt cold and dead. The silence was unearthly, and only the beating of my own heart broke the stillness of the night.

I did not knock at the door at once. What, I reflected, if Master Sturgeon was not as drunk as he appeared? What if he awoke, and discovered that I had locked him in his room? Would he not cry aloud, and arouse some sleepy official, who would be doubtless within call? Loose as had been the discipline in prisons since the coming of the king had been proclaimed, there must be still some semblance of order remaining. I therefore crept back to his door again and listened. Yes, there could be no doubt about it. He was breathing heavily like a man who would not awake for several hours. I therefore found my way back again, and listened at the door in which he said the woman was confined.

Yes, there could be no doubt about it, there was a movement within. I heard the rustle of a woman's dress. I heard some one sighing. I listened if possible more silently, and heard a voice, a woman's voice. I will write down what I heard, for although I deem it an ill-judged act, as a rule, to repeat a woman's prayers, yet because it may show that I had reason for believing in the woman's innocence in spite of all that had been said to her discredit, I will even do so. For the woman was praying.

"Great Judge of men," she said, "Thou who art God over all, and hast in all ages been kind to those that trust in Thee, be pleased to deliver me. For I am sorely set about with danger. Thou knowest the thoughts of my heart, Thou understandest why I am brought to this condition. Thus because Thou understandest all things I come to Thee with confidence. Be pleased to set at nought the cunning devices of men, and even as the doors of the prison were

thrown open to the Apostles of old time, be pleased to open the doors of my prison. But if it is Thy will that I should suffer, help me to deport myself even as one who trusts in Thy mercy through the merits of Christ, who died for the world."

At this there was a silence, and after waiting a moment I made a slight noise at the door, so that she might be prepared for my coming. Then I put my lips to the key-hole, and spoke. "Be silent and fear not," I said in a whisper.

"Who is there?" I heard her say.

"A friend," I replied, "be not afraid."

Upon this I put the key in the door, and to my delight it opened wide. A moment later I stood within the woman's prison house.

Dim as was the light of the candle, for a moment it dazzled her eyes, so that she could not see plainly, but ere long she made out who I was, and then I saw that she was overcome with astonishment.

"Master Rashcliffe!" she said in a frightened whisper.

"Yes," I made answer.

"How came you here?"

"To deliver you if I can."

For a moment she seemed too overwhelmed for further speech, but presently I saw that she conquered her astonishment, and I thought I saw that half angry half-defiant look which I had detected when I first overtook her on the road outside Folkestone.

"Do you know you run great danger?" she asked.

"Perhaps," I replied, for somehow her presence seemed to make me slow of speech.

"Then what led you to enter these walls?"

"I have told you," I replied.

"But how could you gain entrance?"

"Another time I will tell you, but there is no time now. Once outside the town I can tell you concerning this and many other matters, but now your liberty is my chief concern."

She looked up into my face as though she would read the story of my life therein, and as she did so I was able to see her more plainly than ever it had been my lot to do.

I saw now what the man at the inn had meant when he said she was fair to look upon, for she possessed a beauty such as I had never seen before. And yet she was different from the beauties of Charles' Court, concerning whom I had heard my father speak. Hers was the beauty of a woman who was as pure as the angels. Concerning this many may smile, and say that I saw her with the eyes of foolish boyhood. Yet although many years have passed since then, and although many harsh judgments have been formed concerning the deed of which she was accused, I hold fast to what I say. Her eyes had all the innocence of the eyes of a child. Her face was as free from marks of passion and guilt as were the faces of which artists dreamt when they painted pictures of the Mother of Christ. Nevertheless, hers was not the face of a child. It was strong and resolute. There was neither fear nor shrinking in her gaze as she turned her eyes to my face. Wonder there was, even amounting to astonishment, but there was more. I saw that this woman with such a beauteous face was capable of deeds of daring and sacrifice. That Joan of Arc, the story of whose deeds had so inspired my imagination years before, was not capable of greater daring than she, and that this woman would follow the call of God as faithfully as did the Maid of Orleans more than two hundred years before. Moreover, her presence suggested no weakness. I saw that though barely twenty years of age, she was not weak, nor of delicate appearance. The blood of health coursed through her veins. Her hands were firm, the light of her eyes burned steadily. Moreover, she was not cast in a small mould, rather she was taller than most women, and was perfectly proportioned.

All this I saw at a glance even although it has taken me some time to set it down on paper, and if I had ever hesitated in my determination to save her from the doom which awaited her, it had now flown to the winds. For I knew that her life was not worth a silver groat. General Monk had determined on her death, and in spite of all talk about the king's clemency, it was freely said that he would show no mercy on those who had aught to do with his father's death. Moreover, as it was given out that both Sir Charles

Denman and Master Leslie were much implicated in this matter, the woman who was so closely connected with them both could expect no mercy.

"You know the meaning of what I told you when we stood together outside Pycroft Hall," she said quietly. "You know of what I am accused now?"

"Yes."

"And you believe it?"

"I believe nothing unworthy of you."

"But you have heard of the proofs?"

"Ay, I have heard; but I know nought of them. They are nothing to me. I promised to befriend you, and I have come to fulfil my promise."

"But can you?"

"Ay, I can."

I meant what I said, for at that moment all difficulties appeared as nothing.

"You can take me outside these prison walls?"

"Ay."

"And after that?"

"After that I know not. Perhaps you have plans in your own mind, but if you have not I can save you."

Perhaps the confident way in which I spoke gave her courage; moreover, I saw by the flash in her eyes that she comprehended what to many other women would have seemed mysterious. For she was no woman of dull intelligence, but one who thought quickly and to purpose.

"If I can reach my father's house I am safe," she said.

"Your father's house? That surely is the first place men will go when they hear of your escape from here."

"Nay, it is not. They will never believe that I should go thither now. If they do, it will not matter; I shall be safe there, and even my father will not know of my presence."

"You have trusty servants, and there are secret places at Goodlands," I said.

She gave me a glance which made my heart burn, although I knew not why.

"But for an accident I should have taken refuge there," she said. "While I was at Pycroft it was given out that I had been recognized in the neighbourhood, and endeavours were made to capture me. So I made my way to

Dorking, where I made myself known to those whose business it was to take me. But I escaped from there, leaving no trace behind, and hoped to reach my father's house."

"But how did you do this?"

"I have many friends."

"But why did you make yourself known at Dorking?"

She looked at me steadily and seemed on the point of speaking; but no word escaped her lips.

"And did Sir Charles Denman accompany you?" I said.

"No," she replied, and there was, as I thought, anger in her tones. "No, he did not."

Why it was I did not know, but I rejoiced at this.

"And you do not know where he is now?"

"No, I do not know," she answered.

She paused a moment, and although it was a joy beyond the telling to be with her and hear her speak, it came to me that not a moment was to be lost if I was to lead her to liberty.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

"THERE is no time for further questioning," I said, "even although there are many things I would ask you;" and then in a few words I told her how I had been able to come thither. She said no word while I spoke to her concerning this, not even to ask a question; nevertheless what I said convinced her that never again would she have such a favourable opportunity of escaping, so without any ado we found our way outside the gaol without a single mishap. Indeed, so easy was the escape from Bedford Gaol that I have wondered many times since concerning our good fortune. But as I have said, the coming of the king, and the carousals consequent thereupon, had caused many things to be turned topsy-turvy, so that we got outside the prison gates without so much as a single word spoken to us. For that matter, I believe that no man save Master Sturgeon ever dreamed that I had entered the place, and no man knew when I went out.

Once outside the prison gates she drew a deep breath, and then I saw her lips move as if in prayer. She had brought a cloak with her, which she now threw over her head, and then she hurried rapidly into the street. We were in the very heart of the town, yet saw we no man, for the time was now past midnight, and most of the revellers had gone to sleep.

"Which way would you go?" I asked.

"Along the Woburn Road," she whispered. "But stay, we must not go as though we were followed. May I take your arm, Master Rashcliffe?"

I felt every fibre of my body tingle as her hand rested on my left arm, and I felt that it should go hard with the man who tried to take her from me. I saw to it, therefore, that my sword was loose in its sheath, and that my pistols were easy to command.

"If once we can cross the river we shall be safer, I think," she said. "The town lies this side the river, and once away from the bridge we shall be less likely to meet any who might molest us."

The night was quiet, I remember. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the moon having been hidden by the passing clouds, there was but little light.

We had not gone above twenty paces along the road, which I think the townspeople called the High Street, when we met two men, who, as I judged, were people of authority.

"Who are you and where go you?" one asked.

"Who are you, and where go you?" I retorted quickly.

"Who am I?" he asked. "I am the town clerk. Now tell me who you are."

"Sir William Bilton is the chief man in Bedford," said my companion in a whisper.

I caught her meaning, and spoke as loudly as I dared. "If a guest of Sir William Bilton may not walk through the town to see how it behaves on the day when the king arrives in London without being stopped by the town clerk, it is passing strange," I answered. "Moreover, I will see to it that he knows concerning the matter."

The man's tone changed in a moment. "I hope no offence, young master," he said humbly. "Will you be

pleased to pay my humble respects to Sir William, and to tell him that I only seek to do my duty?"

"That is very well," I answered in a tone of offended dignity. "I find no fault with a zealous officer of the town, nevertheless I thought a man in your position could distinguish between a drunken brawler and a man of quality."

"I crave your pardon, worshipful sir," he said, "but I have had much trouble to-night, for nearly every constable and night watchman is drunk. Therefore, although there is much licence at such a time, yet for the good name of the town I must e'en do my duty."

"Ay, I see that, and I will at the first opportunity I have tell Sir William what a faithful town clerk he has. Moreover, you may not take a crown amiss with which to drink the king's health, also that of Sir William."

A moment later we were left alone again, and then we walked slowly down the street. Had I been alone I think I should have hastened, but my companion pressed my arm, and bade me in a whisper to go slowly.

I heard the two men talking together, as though they doubted who we were, but presently they decided to go on their way, and great was my delight as I heard their retreating footsteps.

A minute later we reached the river, which was crossed by means of a roughly built bridge. I noted that the river ran slowly here, and was perchance a little more than forty yards wide. On our left was a dark building, which looked grim and forbidding, standing as it did upon the river bank.

"That is the town gaol," said my companion. "I hoped when I was taken that I should have been imprisoned there. Then would I have escaped two days ago."

"How?" I asked.

"I would have crept out by one of the windows, and swum across the river," she answered.

"But how could you have crept out by the windows?"

"There are those within that gaol who would do aught for me," she answered.

This she said as we crossed the bridge, eagerly looking around her as she spoke.

We still kept straight on, perhaps a hundred yards or more, when she suddenly took a turning to the right.

"And where go we now—Lady Denman?" I asked.

She gave a start, and then stood still as I mentioned her name.

"Nay, not that," she said almost hoarsely.

"It is not easy to speak to you unless I call you by your name," I said.

"But call me not by his name. He hath been the cause of all our troubles?"

She said these words with such bitterness of voice that she might not have been the same woman who had been speaking a few moments before.

"But he is your husband," I said almost brutally.

She hesitated a few seconds, and then, still holding my arm, she walked by my side along the road.

"There be many reasons which lead a woman to call a man husband," she said. "Not every woman loves the man whose name she bears, and——" here she stopped again like one who seemed to fear she had said too much. "Besides," she went on, "certain subjects are painful. I can go faster if you wish."

"I am sorry if I have said aught to make you angry with me, Lady——"

"Constance," she said; "call me Mistress Constance. Nay, you have done nought to make me angry. Hark! what is that?"

We were now outside the town, and houses were not so plentiful; nevertheless, here and there cottages were scattered, and from some of the windows I saw flickering lights. What we heard was the sound of footsteps and the shout of men's voices.

"They come towards us, not after us," I heard her murmur.

"Perchance there is an alehouse on the road," I suggested, "and these are men who have been drinking there."

"There is an alehouse; but listen——"

We stopped and listened, and I felt sure I was right in my conjecture.

"Am I a constable," I heard one say, "and shall I see such goings on? I tell you, you are drunk!"

"Ay, I am, and so are you, Master Blewitt. The man who is not drunk to-day is not worthy to be called an

Englishman. It is only Puritans and women who are not drunk. Ah, we had not been so drunk if Master Leslie's daughter had not been safely in gaol. Had Master Leslie been able to hold up his head he would have done much to keep the town sober, king or no king."

"Ay, that is the worst of these Puritans, and that is why I am glad the king hath come back. There will be no sin in getting drunk now, nay, nor no sin in kissing a pretty girl. Down with the Puritans, I say, and to the gallows with Master Leslie's pretty daughter."

"Nay, 'twould be a pity to put a piece of rope around such a pretty neck."

"What, man! You never saw her neck."

"Ay, but I did, and her face too. I never saw it till she was brought to the river's bank. But I saw it then, and I shall never forget it. Ay, I would know it among ten thousand."

I felt Mistress Constance grasp my arm more tightly with her right hand, while with her left she drew her mantle more closely around her face.

"Shall we go back?" she asked.

"What, towards the prison?"

"Oh no—let us go on."

Indeed we could do nought else, for the men had caught sight of us by this time, and I heard one man exclaim, "Ay, here is a man and a wench coming!"

"Do not fear," I whispered: "there be but three, and they are wellnigh drunk. If the worst comes to the worst I will fight them all—and meanwhile you can escape."

I felt her shiver, even while her fingers gripped my arm still more tightly. Brave as she was, she was still a woman, who shrank from being brought into contact with brutal and profane men.

"Do not leave me if you can help it," she whispered, and then she seemed to master herself, and we walked boldly towards them.

"Good morrow," said one of the men.

"Good morrow," I replied.

"And whither go you?"

"That is my business."

"Ay, and mine too. Know you I am a constable and carry a truncheon? Come, tell me who you are."

"Ay, and let the wench show us her face," said another.

"Ay, and let her give us a kiss," said the third.

My anger was getting the better of me now, for not only did they say what I have written down, but much more, which must have been sorely distasteful to Mistress Constance's ears.

Without any more ado, therefore, I drew my sword.

"The man who approaches a step nearer will have to swallow six inches of steel," I said.

Drunk as they were they started back. One however, who did not seem quite as drunk as the others, eyed us closely.

"Now, then, Peter Blewitt," he said, "you boast that you are a brave man, and you carry a truncheon. At him! At him!"

But Peter Blewitt did not move.

"And you say you are never frightened!" sneered the other. "You say that you will take me to the lock-up. You! you haven't the courage of a bantam cock!"

This seemed to sting the drunken constable, for he made as though he would come towards me, and throwing off Mistress Constance's hand, I seized a pistol, and held it towards them.

"Unless you go your way I shoot," I cried.

"Now then, Peter Blewitt, surely you are not afraid of a boy's popgun? At him, man! at him!"

With drunken gravity the constable drew his truncheon and came towards me. I was loth, great as the danger was, to use my weapons, for though I had been trained to the use of both, I had never had occasion to defend myself by them before. In this case my hesitation almost led to my undoing, for the feel of the truncheon having evidently given the constable fresh courage, he rushed upon me suddenly, and struck at me with all his might. He did not miss me by more than six inches, and had I not slipped aside, I should have been completely at his mercy, for he was a strong man. As it was, however, he missed me completely, and not only that, but well-nigh fell down at my feet. Peter Blewitt's action, however, proved an example for the others.

"I'll see who the wench is, pistol or no pistol," I heard one say, and I saw him seize Mistress Constance's cloak, and try to pull it aside.

At this I hesitated no longer, but struck at him with my sword. Whether the blade cut its way through the man's thick clothes I know not, but he dropped his arm in a moment, and then, carried away by my desire to be rid of them, I lifted my left arm and fired. I have been told since that the bullet only grazed the man's shoulder, but he cried out like one in the death agony. "I'm killed, I'm killed! Help!" he cried.

At this he took to his heels, and flew as though the furies were at his heels, while the others, apparently frightened at the report of the pistol, followed him howling at the top of their voices.

"Are you hurt?" asked Mistress Constance.

"No; and you are safe!"

"Yes. The man did not see my face. Come, let us go."

We hurried along the road for it may be five minutes; then she stopped.

"There is a stile here somewhere," she said. "I am sure we have not passed it. Ah, there it is."

She leaped lightly over it, and then followed the windings of a footpath. Through two fields we passed together without speaking, then she turned on me suddenly.

"Thank you, Master Rashcliffe," she said; "you are a brave man."

"What do you mean?" I stammered.

"I am safe now. You need not fear for me any more. I thank you from the depths of my heart."

"But you are not arrived at your destination yet."

"No, but I shall be there soon. You see those trees? Once behind them I am safe.'

"But——"

"It will not be well for you to come farther, Master Rashcliffe. You need not fear for me. Forgive me if I desire to be alone. It is not because I am not grateful. You have saved me from death, a terrible death. Goodbye. We shall never meet again."

My heart grew cold within me. "You have told me nothing," I stammered. "That is, the time may come

when I can be of—that is, I desire to be your friend, even as I told you more than a week ago at—that is, on the night I saw you first."

"No, no. I had better tell you nothing. If I am not taken prisoner again—which I shall not be; no, I will die first!—you will never see me more. But I will pray for you, pray that God will preserve you and give you happiness. But tell me," she cried, and it seemed as though she had remembered something else, "can you get away in safety? You must have had difficulty in coming to me."

"There is no need to fear for me, Mistress Constance," I said, fearing to give her pain on my account, and thus saying words which I was far from being sure of. "I will get away from Bedford without any man being the wiser, and you need not fear that I will ever tell any man that I have seen you. But I thought not to part from you so soon. There are many things I would ask of you. Much hath happened since I saw you last, and perchance you can give me an explanation."

"I can tell you nothing, nothing."

"But you spoke to that old man. You knew him. I saw him also. I had speech with him, and I would know who he was. The knowledge would advantage me much."

"No, no, I must not, I dare not. Good-bye. I thank you beyond words for what you have done, and you need not fear for me. I am safe now. I can hide while search is being made. After that I shall find a home in another land."

"Another land?"

"Ay. There can be no longer a home in England for such as I. Good-bye."

Again she held out her hand, and in so doing she allowed her cloak to drop, so that I saw her face again, and again my heart grew warm as I saw it.

"I cannot let you go like this," I said. "Perchance you will need help again. If you do, then I desire to be at your side to render such service as may lie in my power."

"Why should you?" she asked. "I am a stranger to you. Our pathways have strangely crossed each other, and you have been kind to me. For this I thank you, oh, so much! but we can never meet again. Our paths

lie apart. I dare not show my face to my country people. I am a Dissenter. My father is hated of the new king, while I"—here her voice grew hoarse and harsh—"I attempted to kill the man whose actions brought him back. Do you realize that, Master Rashcliffe? Since that day I have been hunted as though I were a mad dog. Since that day I have had to adopt all sorts of disguises. I have had to hide in secret places, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of a man who—who made me do his will, even when my heart grew sick at the thought of it."

"Then you need a friend all the more. I know nothing of the history of your marriage with Sir Charles Denman, and——"

"Do not seek to know it," she cried passionately. "I shall escape now. Since God hath led you to deliver me from Bedford Gaol, even when hope had died within my heart, will He forsake me now?"

"No, but if you need me?" I cried. "Will you not promise to send for me if you need me?"

"Is that your desire? Knowing what you know of me, do you wish to endanger yourself for me?"

"Does not my presence in Bedford to-night prove it?"

"But how may that be? Where can I send?"

"There is a man near St. Paul's Cross who keeps an inn called the *Virgin Queen*," I made answer. "He was once a servant of my father's. His name is Caleb Bullen. I will speak to him directly I return to London, and if you send a letter to me in care of him it will surely reach me."

I saw that she looked steadily towards me as I spoke, and I thought she hesitated.

"When I need help I will send to you. But stay! I may need protection from my—husband. Will you shield me from him?"

She said this bitterly, and as she spoke my heart became hard. Why should I seek to befriend the wife of another man? Was not her place at his side? Then I remembered the way he spoke to her in the inn at Folkestone, and while I pitied the woman, I felt like hating the man.

"I will help you against all who would harm you," I said.

She grasped my hand convulsively.

"God protect you and preserve you," she said; and then before I realized what she had done, I saw her speeding swiftly across the meadows towards the trees she had spoken of.

I started to follow her, but deemed such an action to be unwise; therefore I stopped and listened. Full five minutes did I wait, but not a sound did I hear. She had disappeared from my view as though she were a shadow of the night. For a time she seemed but the creature of one's dreams, and the events of the night only the imaginings of a disordered mind. Yet I knew it was not so.

Presently, drawn by a curiosity which I was unable to overcome, I went towards the group of trees I have spoken of, and presently I saw a large house wellnigh hidden by much foliage. After that I stayed not a minute, but hurried back with all speed towards Bedford.

The reason for this will be plain. While I was with Mistress Constance, my one thought was to ensure her safety, but directly I was convinced that she had found a refuge, I realized my own danger. It came upon me with great suddenness that I must leave the town within an hour. I knew that the woman's flight from the gaol might be discovered any moment, and thus I should, if I were not careful, be drawn into a net of difficulties. It would be easy to raise the hue and cry, and then I should nowhere find rest for the sole of my foot. I realized that the carousals consequent upon the coming of the king had allowed me to effect her escape. At no other time would it have been possible to have done such a thing. But vigilance had been suspended, and every turnkey had deemed it his duty to become drunk in the king's honour. In this also lay my hope for escape from Bedford that night.

My work, therefore, was to get into the town with all speed, to saddle Black Ben in secret, and to ride away before any man should become aware of my whereabouts. If Master Sturgeon were still asleep this might be easy, for I had taken care to examine the exits from the stable at the time when I had taken up my quarters at *The Bull*. Moreover, Black Ben, although I wished he had many

more hours' rest, had been well fed, and would by this time be ready for a gallop. It is true I had ridden him sixty miles, but his staying power was wonderful, and I knew he would go till he dropped.

It did not take me long to reach *The Bull*, where I found the carousers still lingering. It struck me, however, that something of importance had happened. The drinkers were not singing and shouting, but talking eagerly.

"You say she hath escaped?" I heard some one say.

"Ay."

"What, from the county gaol?"

"Ay, and Master Sturgeon is murdered."

"Murdered!"

"It is thought that some friend of Master Leslie's found his way into the gaol, and did away with him."

"And the woman is gone?"

"So it is said. I am going thither to see. I heard the news only a minute ago."

"Who told thee?"

"One of the night watchers, and he had it from one of the turnkeys."

All this time I stood in the yard of *The Bull* beneath an open window.

"Stay, I will go with thee," said one.

"Ay, and I would too," said another, "but I am too drunk."

"Ay, and I too," said another, "and whether Master Leslie's wench hath escaped or no, I will e'en drink till daylight."

With that two or three left the inn, while I cautiously found my way into the stable.

I knew that if I did not get away within the next few minutes my liberty, and perhaps my life, could not be valued at a silver groat.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW I LEFT BEDFORD

IF ever a man worked quickly and silently it was I. In less time than it takes me to tell I had thrown Black Ben's saddle across his back and buckled the girths thereof.

As the saddle-bags contained nought of value, I had no trouble with them, and before a minute had passed away the bridle was around my horse's head.

"Come, my boy," I whispered, "there is a hard gallop before you, so we must haste."

Whether he understood me or no I dare not say, but he whinnied as though he knew my will, and followed my lead into the yard. I had opened the gate on entering, and it had struck me, even as I had done this, how easy it would have been for a horse-thief to enter the stable and take whatever nag he pleased, as far as the ostler was concerned. Not that I troubled about Black Ben, for no man but myself had been on his back since he was foaled, neither for that matter, dare any man do this. For while he was obedient to my hand, and was as gentle as a lamb with me, he would not suffer another to mount him. In truth, the ostler was afraid of him when I brought him in, neither would Black Ben have allowed him even to bring his corn had I not spoken to him, and bidden him be quiet. I had no fear, therefore, that any man would steal him. Thus when I unfastened the stable gate with so much ease, I had no fear that I should not find him waiting for me.

As I led him out into the yard Black Ben pricked up his ears, as though he heard strange sounds, and on seeing this my heart sank in my shoes, for I heard a number of people running, and as far as I could judge they were coming towards the inn.

"Where is he? Is he gone?"

"Where is who gone?"

This question was asked by some one who stood by the front door of the inn.

"The young stranger from London."

"Why, what hath he done?"

"Spirited away Master Leslie's daughter. Where is he?"

"In bed hours ago, I expect. He drank nought, but just listened to what the rest were saying."

"Hath he paid his count?"

"Nay. He hath had nought but boiled beef for his supper, and a pint of ale to wash it down. That is but a little matter. Then when he hath paid for his bed and breakfast, he will owe me but a crown."

"But is he in bed?"

"Nay, I know not. This is not a time to know whether a man be in bed or no. Every man hath desired to drink the king's health, and so I have e'en been kept busy drawing ale. But I will send and find out."

"Ay, send and find out. But did you not see him go away with Master Sturgeon?"

"That did I not. Have I not told you that I have been over-busy to-night?"

"Well, he must be found. It is he who hath spirited away Master Leslie's daughter."

"Nay, man, how could he do that?"

"He wellnigh killed Master Sturgeon, locked him in the county gaol, took his keys, and liberated the maid. I tell you he hath done this."

"A pretty cock-and-bull story!"

"But I tell you he hath. One of the turnkeys was found sober enough to unlock the governor's door, and after he woke him, Master Sturgeon told the turnkey that he had been imprisoned by the young stranger from London."

"Say that Queen Mary hath come to life again. I tell you, you be all too drunk to know the truth of this."

"Not so, Master Jiggins; we have been drinking as men should, but we be not so drunk as that. Besides, Master Fulton—the town clerk, saw a man and a woman together not far from the gaol, but he did not think it could be Master Leslie's daughter, because the man claimed to be the friend of Sir William Bilton, and, as you know, Sir William despises Master Leslie, as every Quaker rascal should be despised."

At this moment some one must have spoken to Master Jiggins from within, for I heard him say, "The chambermaid hath it that no one is in the young stranger's bed-chamber."

"Then hath he escaped. But we must find him. The town clerk hath it that ten guineas will be given to him who will lay hands on him."

"But where is the warrant for this?"

"Master Fulton's word is enough warrant, Master Jiggins. But stay, he hath a horse. Is the horse in the stable?"

At this I knew that what I did must be done quickly.

I was therefore on Black Ben's back before they could enter the yard, by the door of which I had been hiding while they were speaking.

"Here he is!" cried the man who had been chief spokesman, and he made a dash at the horse's head.

"At him, my boy!" I cried, and the faithful animal darted at the fellow with open mouth.

In spite of themselves the crowd made way for me as I dashed through. Partly, I suspect, because they were not sure who I was, and partly because Black Ben careered so wildly that no man dared to approach him.

"Your count, you blackguard, your count!" I heard Master Jiggins say, who evidently cared more about that than the recapturing of Mistress Constance. Indeed, I heard in after days that Master Jiggins had a warm affection for Master Leslie, and rejoiced that she had escaped from the hands of the drunken governor.

I threw him a couple of crowns as I dashed away.

"That is double what you would have asked, Master Jiggins," I cried, and then I laughed aloud, for the whole pack of them—and there must have been at least twenty of them—stood open mouthed even while I rode away. Never did I realize how silly a number of drunken men could be, and how easy one who had kept his head clear could deal with them. Through the whole night I had worked my will because of the king's command that every man should drink his health, and now at the last I rode away unscathed, having accomplished the thing I had come to Bedford to perform.

It was no wonder, therefore, that I should laugh. The spirit of adventure was hot within me, and now that I sat upon Black Ben's back, I knew that unless they had firearms no man could harm me. For although he had travelled from London to Bedford that day, I knew that now he had had a few hours' rest and a good feed of corn, he could do the whole journey back again and be none the worse for it. Moreover, I doubted if there was a horse in Bedford which could overtake me.

"After him! after him!" I heard some one shout. "He hath flouted us, and laughed in our faces."

Then I heard a louder cry, followed by a silence as though

some one in authority had come upon the scene. I longed to shout back, so as to put them upon a false track, but reflected that the least said was the soonest mended, so I gave Black Ben rein, and before long was out of both sight and hearing of Bedford town.

Had I known then that I should soon see Bedford again under different circumstances, I do not think I should have been so light of heart. But coming events do not always cast their shadows before them, in spite of old women's wisdom; and so, feeling my good horse beneath me, and seeing the hedges fly by me as he dashed along the road, I felt that I had nought to fear.

Besides, I had succeeded far beyond my expectations. I felt sure that Mistress Constance was safe, for I knew that she was one who spoke not lightly, and as I remembered what she told me in the prison I knew that she was even then in some secret hiding-place, watched over by a faithful servant, and that perhaps even her father knew not what had become of her.

As may be imagined, I rode straight towards London. Had it been safe I think I should have stayed near Bedford, so that I might in case of need have rendered help to Mistress Constance. But I reflected that I should do more harm than good by staying there, and in spite of passing doubts I felt sure that she was safe. Moreover, London was the place I desired to be in. It would be difficult for any man from Bedford to find me there, and I had plans in my mind which I hoped would forward the schemes which had been formulating there. I also wanted to see my father again, and to know what he had been doing since we parted at Canterbury.

I had not long left Bedford before morning began to dawn, and by the time I had reached the town of Hitchin it was broad daylight. Much as I desired to rest here, both for the sake of Black Ben as well as myself, I rode straight on, barely entering the town, but taking a narrow and somewhat unfrequented road instead. Not a soul did I meet, and this pleased me much, because, in case of pursuers, no one would be able to give information. When I had covered half the distance between Hitchin and St Albans, I stopped by a wayside inn for an hour, keeping a

sharp look-out on the road all the while. By noon I had reached St. Albans, but I did not stay here, pushing on instead to the town of Barnet, where I deemed myself safe from pursuit. Moreover, having once arrived at Barnet, I found the roads so full of travellers, who were on their way to London to join in the revels, as well as others coming from them, that my presence could not call for any comment. Nevertheless, I was very thankful when I reached the *Virgin Queen*, an inn close by St. Paul's Cross, where I gave my horse in charge of Caleb Bullen, an old-time and faithful servitor of my father's.

I spent two days in London trying to find my father, as well as taking part in the festivities which were held, but although I went everywhere that the public gathered, never once did I catch a glimpse of my father, neither did I meet with any man who had seen aught of him. I concluded therefore that he had again returned home, and had settled down to the old quiet life. Much as I wanted to see him I deemed it wise not to go thither. First, because if any at Bedford had by any means whatsoever become acquainted with my name, they might place watchers there; and second, because I knew that by going home I should put myself outside the possibility of hearing whatever news might be stirring. I therefore counted the crowns which I still possessed, and, finding that I had enough for my needs, I remained at the *Virgin Queen*, and partook of the good fare which Caleb Bullen provided.

For a week London town was a scene of constant gaiety, for although the great rejoicing took place on the day when the king rode into London, it took the people a full week to settle down to the ordinary course of life. The playhouses which Oliver Cromwell had closed were all open, while seemingly all traces of the old Puritan life which had grown up under the great Protector were swept away in a day. Laws were relaxed, and the old stern system of morals was not only broken, but laughed at as unworthy of a free people.

It was not until the fourth day after I had come back to London that I heard it declared that Master Leslie's daughter had escaped from prison, and that in spite of every endeavour to discover her hiding-place, she had not been found.

It was said, moreover, that her escape had been brought around by a friend of Master Leslie's, who had succeeded in putting a sleeping potion in the drink of the gaolers, and had thus succeeded in his plans.

As may be imagined, this news caused me great satisfaction, most because Mistress Constance was still at liberty, but also because no shadow of suspicion rested upon me. The latter conviction was, however, rudely shaken when at the end of a week I was told that two men had been at the *Virgin Queen* inquiring after me.

"What were they like?" I asked of Caleb Bullen, who I knew was my faithful friend.

"They were gaily attired, Master Roland. They wore swords by their sides, and long feathers in their caps."

"And you took them to be men of quality?"

"Ay, I should judge so," replied Caleb thoughtfully. "They swore much, talked much, laughed much, and drank much wine, so I judged they were of gentle blood. They mentioned great names with much freedom, and seemed to know of all that was going on at Court."

"But what did they say?"

"They asked whether Master Roland Rashcliffe was living at the *Virgin Queen*; whereupon I answered that you did, and that you were a good customer, seeing you ate your victuals, drank your ale, and paid your count without grumbling. Then they asked how long you had been staying here, and I told them since the day of the coming of the king. Upon that they said they would call again this evening at six by the clock, and would I tell you that they would deem it polite of you not to go out at that hour, as they would come on an affair of importance?"

This, as may be imagined, set me to pondering gravely, but after careful consideration, and asking Caleb Bullen many questions, I came to the conclusion that they could have nought to do with the folks at Bedford. I determined, therefore, that I would be in the inn at the time mentioned, wondering all the time what they wanted of me.

The clock at St. Paul's Cross had scarcely chimed six when I saw two young men, dressed with much richness, and carrying themselves with a jaunty air, enter the hall of the inn.

"Hath Master Rashcliffe yet arrived?" one asked of Caleb Bullen.

"Ay," replied mine host, pointing to me, whereupon with a great show of ceremony they came to me.

"Master Roland Rashcliffe," said the older of the two.

"I am Roland Rashcliffe," I replied, looking at them closely, for I was not yet free from fears that they had heard something of my doings at Bedford.

"We bring you greeting, Master Rashcliffe, and if it would cause you no trouble we would see you alone in a place where we can speak without interruption."

I therefore led the way into a room where such quietness could be found, and then, having bid them sit down near the window, I was able to get a better view of them. They were both young men, not, as I judged, more than thirty years of age, and I was not long in coming to the conclusion that Caleb Bullen had judged rightly when he said they were men of quality. Both were very richly attired in the kind of finery which came into vogue directly the king returned, and though, as I judged, both had been drinking much wine, they carried their wine well, and showed no sign of loss of sense.

"We hear you were at Dover when his Majesty landed, Master Rashcliffe, and that you impressed him favourably. It is better to be born lucky than rich, for, by my soul, his Majesty hath had so many hangers on since he entered his faithful London that none of us, save a very few of his chosen ones, can get more than a nod or a wave of his hand."

"I was indeed in Dover," I replied, "and a gay sight it was."

"The king spoke graciously to you, we heard."

"I was fortunate beyond my deserts."

"Ah, say not so, say not so. Corks will swim, and those whom the gods favour will obtain the smile of kings. We are even now here on an errand which, if it means not royal favour, is so near to it that a man can scarcely distinguish it from such."

Again I examined them closely, and tried to guess from whence they came and who sent them.

"Ah, but we have come here like a couple of grooms," the spokesman of the two went on. "But forgive us, Master

Rashcliffe. Manners, like everything else, need constant practice, and since these Dissenters and Puritans have ruled the land, there hath been no opportunity of showing courtesy due from one gentleman to another. To such a state hath these rascally psalm-singing knaves brought us. Let me say, then, that the name of my friend here is the Honourable John Burleigh, youngest son of Lord Burleigh, while I am Stanley Carew, son of Sir William Carew, of Cornwall."

I bowed ceremoniously, even as they had done when they told me their names.

Upon this Master Stanley Carew looked around the room as though some one was in hiding; then, upon being assured that we were alone, he went on—

"We have come to you from one of royal blood, Master Rashcliffe, with royal commands."

"From the king?" I asked.

"Nay, not from the king, that is exactly, but doubtless this letter will explain much to you."

I took the letter, and noted that the paper was emblazoned with the royal arms. It contained only these words: "*Master Roland Rashcliffe is commanded to appear before us to-night at Whitehall at the hour of eight.*"

The signature I could not at first make out, but on closer scrutiny I discovered it to be signed by James, Duke of York. On lifting my eyes from the paper, I saw that both my visitors were looking eagerly towards me, as though they would make out what had been written to me, but, knowing so little of them, I folded the missive and put it beneath my doublet.

"Doubtless you have received pleasant news, Master Rashcliffe?" said Master Carew with a meaning smile.

"News from those in high places should always be pleasant," I replied.

"By the saints, no. And truly by the look on your face I judge that joy doth not overcome you, Master Rashcliffe. Well, what then? A man of wit must even use it to his own advantage. Moreover, doubtless the message is of importance, seeing we were charged to deliver it into no hands but your own. Is there aught in the way of information we can give you, Master Rashcliffe?"

Now this set me thinking. It became plain to me that they knew not the contents of the letter; moreover, I judged that they sought to obtain information concerning it, and thereby obtain power which they hoped would be useful.

"No," I replied, "I do not know that there are any questions that I desire to ask."

I saw the two exchange glances as I spoke, but Master Carew went on quite glibly. "Then we shall have naught to do but take back your answer, Master Rashcliffe."

"Were you requested to take back an answer?" I queried.

"For that matter, no, I do not think we were; still, we thought you would doubtless desire to send a fitting reply."

"As I understand it, no reply is needed, Master Carew," I replied. "Nevertheless, I thank you for bringing me the letter, which I will lay deeply to heart."

After this they stayed some time, trying by many means to let drop some hint concerning what they had brought me. But I deemed it best to keep a still tongue, and when they presently left me, looking as I thought not over pleased with the success of their visit, I called to mind that I had said nothing which could in any way advantage them.

Nevertheless, the letter gave me much food for anxious thought. Why should the brother of the king desire to see me? To answer this I cast my mind over my adventures since I had left my father's house, but only one event led me to connect the Duke of York with them. That, as may be remembered, was the speech of Master Rickmore and Master Hamilton on the night when I had been dragged from my horse when riding from Canterbury to London. I called to mind the words of the man Hamilton, who related to the other what he said Duke James had said to him. *"By the Holy Virgin get hold of the young rascal. Never let him out of your sight until you have obtained all he hath found, and know all he can tell you."*

For a long time I sat thinking of this, and of many other things in relation thereto, and the more I thought the more was I convinced that I ran no little risk in obeying the Duke of York's command. On the other hand, I could see that it would not be wise to refuse. The king's brother was

next to the king himself, and if the story of Lucy Walters was false was the next heir to the throne. To refuse his commands, therefore, would be nearly as bad as refusing those of the king himself. It would moreover arouse suspicion, and might possibly lead to many unpleasant results.

But more than all this, I longed much to know what the duke would say to me. I desired to find out the motives which prompted him to send for me. I did not fear danger—thoughtless youth seldom apprehends that—but I did ardently wish to discover what was in Duke James' mind.

The clock of St. Paul's struck the hour of seven. I had not therefore a minute to spare. It was half an hour's walk from St. Paul's Cross to Whitehall, so I went to my bedchamber to bedeck myself in the best finery I possessed, and ere long I was passing Fleet prison on my way to Whitehall.

CHAPTER XVIII

JAMES, DUKE OF YORK

THE clocks of Westminster were striking eight as I drew near the place I had been bidden to come in Whitehall. My heart beat fast at thought of what might happen to me, and of the commands which might be laid upon me, yet did I go on without faltering, for the more I wondered at the happening the more did I desire to know why I was commanded thither. The clock had barely ceased striking when a hand was laid upon my shoulder.

"Master Roland Rashcliffe," a voice whispered in my ear.

"You speak as if you know," I replied, and turning I saw a man of grave demeanour, and of somewhat sad countenance.

"Follow me. Ask no questions, and make no protest at aught you may see."

This he also said in a whisper, and although I obeyed him I liked not the secrecy of the business. As I passed along I noticed that many people were around, and that all seemed to be in gay humour and in gay attire. Truly the coming of the king had made a difference to London town. The whole city seemed to be given over to pleasure

and none of that solemn decorum which marked it a year before was now manifest.

We had not gone far when we left Whitehall and entered the park which lies behind. Here also were the same scenes of gaiety. Indeed, never had I seen so many gaily-dressed women in my life before. The park was in the summer of its loveliness, flowers bloomed on all sides, the trees were in wellnigh full leaf, the birds sang, while loud laughter, both among men and women, was to be heard continually. My companion paid no heed to any of these things, however. He strode quickly along, stopped at the door of one of the houses, and a minute later I stood behind him in one of the great houses. Without hesitation he led the way upstairs, and without ceremony entered a large room. As far as I could judge it had been but lately fitted up, for the things I saw were new, and shone with much splendour. Nevertheless, it did not look like a residence, but rather appeared to be a place where a man of authority might gather his friends around him. No one was in the room, and although it stood so near to Whitehall the utmost silence reigned, except that I thought that I heard whispering voices in an adjoining compartment.

"Do not dare to oppose him," said the man who accompanied me; "assent to all his commands, agree with all he saith, although your judgment will lead you otherwise. Above all be silent as death afterwards. Remember, he hath no mercy."

"You speak of the Duke of York?"

"I speak of the next king," he replied. "Therefore, do as I bid you, and be wise. Be surprised at nothing you may hear, even if he saith things that should not be heard by such a youth as you."

He had scarcely finished speaking when two men entered the room. The one was the Duke of York; I had seen him ride away in the king's coach by the side of the king when he left Dover. His appearance, as I thought, was changed. I thought then that he was, although of somewhat austere countenance, pleasant to look upon. That night he looked angry and cruel. His face was heavy, and, if I mistook not, besotted, but whether he

had been partaking freely of wine I could not tell. His companion's face was hidden, and although I thought I detected something familiar in his gait, I knew not who he was.

"This is the youth?"

"It is, Your Grace."

The duke looked at me sternly and silently, as though he would read my heart, and although I dared to lift my eyes to his but once, I thought his eyes were bloodshot.

Having seated himself, he bade me come near to him.

"Master Roland Rashcliffe?" he said.

"Yes, Your Grace," I replied.

"Tell me, boy, is your father an honest man?"

The question was asked abruptly, as though he would take me unawares.

"He fought for your father," I replied.

"So did many a knave, until he thought he would gain by joining the rebels."

At this I was silent.

"Why did he send thee to find out if there was any truth in the lying story that his Majesty married the wench Lucy Walters?"

"To discover the truth," I replied, for it seemed to me at that moment as though there were nought else to say.

At this he laughed, but the laugh was cruel, and never did I hear a man's voice that had less mirth in it.

"Well, what have you found?" he said presently. "You left your home many days ago. You went to Folkestone, from thence you made a midnight journey to a lonely house. Tell me how you fared, and what trophies you possess as a result of your valour."

At this I was silent, for in truth never did words appear more dangerous than at this moment.

"How now, sirrah! You do not speak!"

King's brother though he was, he made me angry, and I resented the tones he used towards me.

"What, you do not answer me? Know you that you do wrong in making me angry? I tell you it would be an easy matter to put another in the already flowing prisons of England, and so I bid you beware. What did you discover at the lonely house, and what did you bring away?"

"You should already know, Your Grace," I replied boldly, for by this time all my fear of him had gone. Perhaps my anger had driven it away. If it had, it were no wonder, for had I been a lackey he could not have spoken with less courtesy, while the thickness of his voice, and his rheumy eyes, made me feel sure that he had been drinking heavily.

"What mean you, young malapert?" he asked.

"I mean that I was attacked by men who used your name when riding to London," I answered; "that they dragged me from my horse, and searched me to the skin. If I had possessed aught they would surely have brought it to you."

At this I was in doubt as to what course he would take. I saw the blood mount to his cheek, and anger gleam from his eyes, while he lifted his hand as if he would strike me. But this was only for a moment. Instead of yielding to anger he burst into a great laugh, as though he had heard a good joke.

"Ha, ha!" he cried, "you discovered that you could do nought without discovery, eh? You found out that the royal arm can strike far, eh? You learnt that you cannot hunt in royal domains without being bitten by the keeper's dogs? Is that not so, my young springald?"

"The king's brother is not the king," I cried, for now I saw that unless I would place myself entirely in his power I must take a bold course.

"What mean you?" he cried.

"I mean that when I have discovered aught that affects the king, I will bear my message to the king," I replied, "but, until then, I will hold my peace as a man should."

"I have a good mind to send you to the dungeons."

"If you did I should soon be a free man again," I replied.

"And how is that?"

"The king would soon hear that his brother threw a youth into prison because that youth knew something that affected the king's honour," I replied. "And the king, on hearing of this, would demand to see him, and he would tell his Majesty many things."

"Tut, tut, youth," he said, still gazing at me curiously. "Do not think because you have answered me pertly

that you have answered me wisely, and do not imagine that although a man doth not wear a crown he hath no power. Oh, I see how it is. You were carried away by what you saw when the king came to London. You saw the London Corporation do his Majesty homage at St. George in the Fields, you saw the streets all flaunting with bunting, you beheld the twelve hundred velvet-coated lackeys, the footmen in purple, and buff, and silver, and green, and blue; you heard the trumpets sounding, the people shouting, and the clergy waiting to do homage to their most gracious and Protestant king. I say, you saw all this, while they took no notice of the heir-apparent. But it is not always the man who wears the crown who reigns. Take our brother Louis across the water. He wore the crown while a priest reigned. It was so before him. Louis XIII, the man who was always tired, wore the crown, but Richelieu ruled the land. But wait a little, Mazarin will die, and then a change will come. Let me tell you something, young malapert. It is the man with will and brains who reigns, whether he be the king or the king's brother. Moreover, it is he who is not too much given over to pleasure, and who holds the true faith."

"Have a care, Your Grace, have a care," said the man who had accompanied me hither, for he saw what by this time I was assured of, that the king's brother had partaken of much wine.

"Have a care for whom?" said the duke angrily. "Am I to be bearded by a boy? Look you here, and remember," and his voice was thick as he spoke, "the king's brother can bestow benefits as well as the king, remember that, and the king's brother can reward those who are faithful. Besides, the man who is only the king's brother to-day may be king next year. Never forget. And think of something else. A man need not be anointed by a bishop to alter a country's laws. Hath any law been passed against the Presbyterians or Puritans or Dissenters? What saith the king? 'Justice to all.' Yet even at this time hundreds of Presbyterians and Puritans have been ousted from their pulpits, while Independents and Baptists crowd our gaols. Who hath done this? 'Oh, no man hath done it,' is the reply. It

is all because the Episcopalians believe that now Charles Stuart is come back they can e'en send the others apacking. But who shall say they have heard no word from James Stuart?"

"Your Grace! Your Grace!"

"Ay, cannot a man speak his own mind? This boy is not a fool, and will know how to be discreet. And now I have a word more to say. Have you, Master Roland Rashcliffe, discovered aught concerning this supposed marriage contract between the king and Lucy Walters?"

"Yes," I replied, before I was well aware, and for which word I was ready to bite my tongue out.

"You have seen it?" and I noticed that he spoke more clearly, as though my news had sharpened his wits.

"I have seen that which purports to be what you inquire after," I replied.

Never did I see a man change more suddenly. He seemed to throw off the effects of wine in an instant.

"You have seen it? Where?"

At this I was silent, for I felt not like giving away my secret.

"Speak, Roland, I command you."

I started, for it was my father's voice which I had heard, and then I knew that it was he who entered the room with the duke, and who had hidden his face from me.

"Father!" I cried.

"Ay, it is I, Roland, and it is I who command you to tell his Grace what he desires to know. I have told him nothing because I have seen nothing, but it is my will that you tell him what you have seen."

My father's presence set me wondering greatly. As I have said, I had not seen him since my return to London, and now to discover that he had been in communication with the king's brother staggered me. Rightly or wrongly, I concluded that he could gain no hearing with his Majesty, and so had sought an audience with the duke.

"Remember," said the duke, "this story is lies from end to end. Yet I do not say that some one hath not forged such a contract. Moreover, if such a contract, although it is as valueless as the paper on which it is written, were to pass from hand to hand, it would set gossips' tongues

wagging, and perchance unhinge affairs of state. You say you have seen this. Where have you seen it?"

In spite of myself I could not help pausing, and whether the king's brother had fears concerning what I should do with my knowledge, or whether he desired to enlist my friendship, I know not, but before I could speak, he went on—

"Did you read it?"

"Ay, I read it."

"What did it say?"

"It was a marriage contract between his Majesty and the Welsh girl, Lucy Walters."

"You can take your oath to this?"

"I can take my oath that I read such words on a piece of parchment."

"Signed by Charles Stuart?"

"Ay, and by others."

"Their names?"

"Pierre Rousseau and François Abelard."

"You swear this?"

"I swear that I saw such a parchment."

"But where? Tell me where?"

"It was in such a strange place that I cannot describe it. Yet methinks I could find it again."

He seemed so carried away by what I had told him that he started to his feet.

"Find it, Master Roland Rashcliffe, and bring it to me. If you will do this, you may depend on my smile all your life through."

"Obey his Grace, Roland," said my father.

"Stay," said the duke, directly my father had spoken, and I thought suspicion gleamed in his eyes. "Your father informs me that your discovery was made before we landed on English shores. You were at Dover at our coming. What have you been doing with yourself since?"

"If you will ask Caleb Bullen, he will tell you I have been staying at the *Virgin Queen*, at St. Paul's Cross," I said; then, fearing further questions, I went on, "but the thing you require of me is not easy of accomplishment. Already I have nearly lost my life in the search thereof, and——"

"I have nought to do with that," he interrupted. "Set out without delay and bring this thing to me, and this I will promise. I will see to it that all your father's estates are restored, and I will take it upon myself to assure your future. There is many an Independent fattening upon fair estates who will soon be in gaol; there is many a highborn dame who will gladly accept the hand of the youth upon whom the Duke of York smiles. Now, then, I seek to hear no more, and know no more. But stay, all such business requires money. Garnett, see to it that a purse with a hundred pounds be given to him. And more, what is done must be done secretly, and no man must know thy doings."

With this he left the room, and without another word passed out of my sight. I make confession here that the interview wellnigh stunned me. The duke had not been one, but three men during the time we had been together At one time he had been cruel, hard, stern; at another he seemed to have his wits muddled with wine, when he had spoken in a way unworthy his high estate; and yet when he left me he made me feel that he was a man to be obeyed, strong, masterful, and clear-minded. In addition to this, my father had evidently been in secret conclave with him, and it was he who had bidden me obey the duke's commands. Therefore, although I was sorely bewildered, because he had commanded I must perforce obey.

One thing gave me peace of mind, and that was the fact that no mention had been made of the woman I had released at Bedford. I felt sure that did the duke dream of my action towards the woman who was accused of attempting the murder of General Monk, he would have used it as a threat in order to make me do his will. As it was, he took both my obedience and my silence for granted, and seemingly had no doubts, in spite of my behaviour during the first part of the interview, that I should dare to refuse his bidding.

"You have heard?" said the man who had accompanied me. "You have your work—do it."

I did not answer, for at this moment my father returned.

"Roland," he said, "here are the hundred pounds.

You will note that they come from me. Obey his Grace's command. It is not only his will, but mine. Now haste, for I fear you have wasted time. Good-bye, and fear nothing."

At this he left me again, while I stood gazing at the door through which he had passed, almost too surprised for words.

"You have heard," said Master Garnett, "now go and be thankful. I need not tell you to be silent. You are not one who is foolish enough to talk with every passer-by, but remember this—if you fail to do the duke's bidding the four seas that wash our shores would not save you from his anger."

Five minutes later I was in the street again, and that which I had seen and heard was only a dream. Still, I had a hundred pounds in my pouch, and I knew that in accordance with the command of the king's brother, I must e'en make a second attempt to obtain what I at that time believed might be the king's marriage contract.

Within two hours of that time I was on horseback again, for by this time the fever of adventure was upon me, and I determined to again find my way within the walls of Pycroft Hall, and to take the parchment I had seen from its strange hiding place.

As I rode along I wondered that I had been content to wait in London so long, and had not, without the duke's command, sought to outwit the old man I had seen in the lonely house. For although I believed the old man had never imagined that I should escape alive, and therefore would not remove the contract from its hiding place until he was able to make terms with the king, I remembered that several days had elapsed wherein he might have carried it I know not whither. It was then I remembered that the great thought in my mind had not been to obtain the parchment which might alter the destiny of the nation, but to give help to the woman with whom I had so strangely been brought into contact. In truth it came to me that so eager had I been to hear news of her after I had returned to London town that I had scarcely ever thought of the mission which had brought us together. At this I grew angry with myself, for although

she was very fair to look upon she was a Dissenter at heart, the wife of a man who had taken part in the death of the king's father, and was even then hiding from those who would bring her to punishment. As I said, I grew angry with myself because of this, yet in spite of my anger I wondered much concerning her, and prayed most earnestly for her safety and her welfare.

By the time daylight dawned I was far away from London, and was riding through one of the fairest tracts of country of which perchance our country can boast. I have, during my life, had occasion to ride through many parts of our land, but never do I remember thinking aught so fair as that through which I passed that day. The sun rose in a cloudless sky, the birds were singing all around me as they perched upon the leafy trees, while on my right hand, and on my left, the countryside rose and fell in gentle hills and dales.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

WHEN I drew near to Pycroft I began to plan how I might carry my designs into effect. For although the thing seemed easy enough at first, it assumed different proportions as I drew nearer to it. Moreover, I continued to upbraid myself for allowing so much precious time to escape, during which Father Solomon might have transported the thing elsewhere. Would not the very fact that I knew the hiding place cause the old man to remove it? Before this time he would doubtless have again descended into the cavern to discover what had become of me, and on finding that I had gone would take steps accordingly.

Nevertheless, I hoped for the best in spite of the fears I have here set down, and when on the Monday I drew near Folkestone, I had my plans all ready. I did not go to the *Barley Sheaf*, as before, but instead rode straight to Pycroft Hall. The same silence reigned as I passed through the woods, and although it was now fast approaching midsummer the birds seemed afraid to sing, so dark and gloomy were the trees which surrounded the house.

No man did I meet, and for this I was very thankful. I

felt that the thing which I desired to do demanded the greatest secrecy, and that it would not be wise to let any man be acquainted with my doings. For this reason I did not even go to an inn, as I had first intended, but instead made my way direct to the house. When I had wellnigh reached the open space which surrounded the building I dismounted and proceeded on foot, leaving Black Ben to roam as he felt disposed. I knew I was safe in doing this, for I had trained him to come to my whistle even as a dog obeys his master. As for any one stealing him, that, as I have explained elsewhere, was impossible.

Directly I had come to the open space I had a feeling that something had happened. They very air seemed laden with mystery, and on casting my eyes towards the house my feelings were confirmed. A great part of the building was in ruins. A few days before it had stood intact, its doors were bolted, its window barricaded; but now not a door remained standing. There was not a whole window to be seen. Eagerly I rushed across towards the tree from which I had first seen the strange old man, but on arriving there I saw that this end of the house was wellnigh completely demolished. All around, moreover, were heaps of débris; desolation was more than ever manifested. But little more than the shell of the building remained.

A minute later I made my way to the room where I had my interview with the old man, but the place was scarcely recognizable. Only one thing remained which reminded me of our meeting. That was a grinning skull, which had somehow survived the wreck of other things.

For a moment I was stunned. I could not comprehend what it all portended; but presently my mind became clearer. Following as well as I was able the course I remembered to have taken with the old man on the night of our interview, I found my way to the place where the trap door had been lifted. A great heap of rubbish crossed the place now, and this I set to work to move with all speed. Ere long I discovered the thing I sought, and remembering the spot where old Solomon had pressed his foot, I did even as he had done, and the door lifted. As it did so I started back, for a choking sulphurous smell arose, and to my excited imagination I thought I heard strange cries.

" It might be the very mouth of hell," I said to myself ; and in truth there was reason for my thought. When I called to mind what he had said, together with the strange history of the place, I did not wonder that the simple folk were afraid to come hither. The sulphurous smoke, moreover, set me coughing greatly, while a great feeling of dread gat hold of me.

But this was only for a moment. Lonely as was the place, and fearful as were the thoughts in my mind, I conquered myself. Perhaps my curiosity helped me in this. For now that I had come so far I determined to probe this thing to the bottom. I felt sure that this was all done by human means, although I could not understand it.

Having seen to it that my flint and tinder and candle were in good condition, I put my foot on the step of the ladder, and descended into the depths as I had done when the old man was with me.

I thought I heard a strange mocking laugh as I did this, but I put it down to my excited imagination, and although my heart beat aloud, I went straight on. On reaching the bottom of the shaft I lit my candle, and then followed the windings of the tunnel, even as I had followed them before. Having made careful note of everything on the previous occasion I found but little difficulty in finding my way again. And yet never in my life had I made so fearful a journey ; for try as I might I could not rid from my mind the fact that I was surrounded by grinning jabbering spirits of the dead, who mocked me in the thing I was seeking to do. Neither could I rid myself of the fear that even then old Solomon was near me, waiting to complete the destruction of my life which he had attempted when we were here together before.

As I look back now I wonder that I did not give up my search in despair, for while any man with good courage can fight a battle in the open day, when his enemy is plainly in sight, it is another matter to face dread darkness, and the thousand things that haunt the darkness. In truth I doubt whether I should have gone forward but for two things. The one was my father's teaching. For this stood me in good stead now. Often had he laughed at the stories of witches and wizards ; often had he scorned in my hearing

stories of the supernatural which were so rife in every home in our land. But this was not all. The desire to possess the thing which would alter the destiny of England nerved me to brave anything. I remembered the look on Duke James' face. I called to mind how I had been attacked on the highway, and the words which had been uttered, and I knew the thing meant much. I had seen the writing on the parchment, and I understood what it meant. Besides, my father had commanded me. His future depended on the discovery, for Duke James had said that if this were brought to him my father's hopes should be fulfilled. And there was more than this. Even then I bethought me of the woman whom I had rescued from Bedford Gaol, and the more I thought of her the more did I fear for her. If she were captured again, should I not, by the possession of this precious document, have means in my hand whereby I could render her service?

Therefore I went forward until I came to the open place where the thing had been placed, and here I stood still. For a moment I thought I was going to swoon, for there were many strange sounds in my head, while the black sides of the cavern, which were dimly revealed by the candle I held in my hand, seemed to be dancing around me. But this I knew was because my heart beat so loudly, and because my blood chased so madly through my veins. So I called all my resolution to my aid, and conquered my weakness.

After a few moments I located the place where the thing had been put, and eagerly I hurried thither.

Yes, there was the black box as I had seen it before. It seemed as though it had never been moved since the hour when Father Solomon had put it back. Feverishly I took it, and then looked fearfully around me, because even then I fancied that watchful eyes might be upon me. But there was nothing.

Holding the box in one hand, and the candle in the other, I remember thinking that my best plan was to get out into the open air, where I could again examine its contents. But I was too impatient for this. Propping my candle between two stones I got down on my knees, and prepared to open it, but I stopped with a start and a shudder.

I could have sworn that I heard a cackling mocking laugh

close to my ears, and again I looked fearfully around. But there was nought to be seen, and so still had all things become that the silence seemed to make a noise.

"It is nought but my fancy," I said aloud, and I shivered at the sound of my own voice. Also many wild fancies flitted across my mind. I thought I saw Lucy Walters change from a beauteous nut-brown maid, with skin fair and smooth, and altogether lovely to behold, into a hideous corrupt-looking hag. She shook a leprous finger at me, and leered mockingly into my face. Again also I thought I heard the mocking cackle of old Father Solomon, which seemed to arouse all sorts of unearthly wails.

"It's nought but my fancy," I again repeated aloud, and this time the sound of my voice gave me courage. I no longer feared unearthly visitants. The thing was in my hands, and I would examine it.

The lid of the box opened without difficulty, and I saw a piece of paper lying within it. As I saw it I laughed aloud, so pleased was I.

Then I took the thing in my hand, and unfolded it. This is what I read :—

He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.

If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put forth more strength.

The lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk mischievous madness.

Vanity of vanity, saith the preacher, all is vanity.

THE WORDS OF SOLOMON THE WISE.

This was all. The marriage contract was gone, and nothing was left in its place save the paper on which the words were written that I have here set down.

Eagerly I peered into the hole where the box had been placed ; but it was empty. Nothing was there save the void space which mocked me.

I stamped my foot in my rage. This, then, was the end of my work. Old Solomon had outwitted me, even as he had said, and I fancied I saw the grin on his face as he had planned my discomfiture.

After a time I grew more calm. There must be a mean-

ing in all this. If the old man had planned all this he must have had reasons for so doing. Had he come hither to find me, and being unable to do so had he been stricken with fear? After all, the thing I had seen was different from this. I had seen the signature of Lucy Walters, and of Charles Stuart. Nothing could destroy that fact. If the old man had taken the parchment away, and destroyed the house, he had done so with a purpose. He must have had a motive in so doing. Was that motive fear or interest? Besides, the old man must have another hiding-place. True I had been a fool, a double-dyed fool, for not keeping the thing when I had once held it in my hand; but it might not be too late to redeem the past. I would find out the meaning of what I had seen; I would probe the thing to the bottom.

All my superstitious fears were gone. I no longer heard whispering voices, or wailing cries; I no longer saw grinning faces or evil forms. The darkness had no dread for me, my anger had driven away all my terrors.

Taking the box with me I hurried back to the stairway by which I had entered, and a few minutes later I stood in the sunlight again. The evening had now begun to draw to its close, but the sun was still visible behind the tree tops, and after the darkness in which I had been immured its light was very pleasant.

"I will not rest until the box hath the true parchment again," I said grimly, as I placed within it the paper on which old Father Solomon had written his mocking words. "There must be some trace of him somewhere; how can I find it?"

I gave a long shrill whistle, and a few seconds later I heard Black Ben whinnying. This was followed by the trample of hoofs, and directly after he came up to me, and rubbed his nose against my hand.

"Ben," I said to him, "we are beaten this time; but you and I will yet succeed," and I patted him gently.

Again he whinnied as though he understood, while I bethought me of what I must do next.

I had some trouble in putting away the black box in my saddle-bag, but I at length succeeded in doing so, after which I rode through the dark woods towards the

highway. By the time I had gone a little way I felt both faint and hungry. The excitement through which I had passed had left me with a great languor, so presently seeing a peasant I inquired the way to the nearest inn, which I found was of the better order of places of refreshment, and where I had no difficulty in obtaining food for both man and beast.

After seeing to it that Black Ben was well groomed and foddered, and having partaken of a good meal myself, I felt my own man again, and ere long found my way into the room where three or four men, whom I judged to be farmers, were drinking. They had been talking eagerly when I entered, but on seeing me they rose, touched their forelocks, and then sat down again.

I greatly desired them to speak freely, so having ordered more refreshments for them, I tried to draw them into conversation. To my satisfaction I soon discovered that my bounty unloosed their tongues, and I found that they vied with each other to answer whatever questions I asked. Nevertheless I was wary even in this, for I was desirous at all hazards to avoid arousing suspicion. I therefore spoke first of the possible harvest, and of the good times we hoped to have now that the king had come to his own.

After this I spoke of the coming of the king, and of the gay doings at Dover, and presently, little by little, I led up the conversation to Pycroft Hall. Directly the name passed my lips, however, they became silent, as though a great fear possessed them.

"Is aught ill with the place?" I asked.

"There is no Pycroft Hall now," said one presently, and his voice almost sank to a whisper as he spoke

"No Pycroft Hall? Why I saw it not long since myself, and a gloomy old place I thought it was," I said.

"The devil hath blown it to atoms," said the man fearfully.

"You are but laughing at me," I cried.

"Nay, worshipful master, but we be not. It hath only happened of late that this hath come to pass."

"Since what hath come to pass?"

"We were speaking of it at the moment when you

entered the room, young master, and not knowing how you might relish such talk, we e'en held our tongues."

"What talk?"

"Why, about the devil blowing up Pycroft Hall."

"If you know aught I should be glad to hear it. I love much such stories as you speak of."

"You are not one that fears the devil, young master?"

"I trust in an easy conscience and a good sharp sword," I made answer. "Nevertheless I love the gossip of the times, whether it concerns the devil or of those who have no dealings with him."

"Well, master, this is what hath taken place. It is said that three days ago some of the king's men came hither to visit it. But before they reached it, although they drew near to it, they heard a great noise, as though the world were coming to an end. Of this there can be no manner of doubt, for I myself heard it, although I was a mile away."

"When was this?" I asked.

"Last Friday that ever was," replied the man. "Friday is the devil's day, and he played his game last Friday. For years it's been haunted as all the country knows. Your honour may have heard of it."

Hereupon he told me a long story which I will not set down here, because I have already mentioned much of the things he said in what I have previously written.

"Well," I said, when he had finished the story, "the king's men went to see it, you say."

"People say it was the king's men, but we be not sure. But be that as it may, when they were on the way to the house, a place I would not go to myself, no not for ten pound in gold, they heard a noise like a clap of thunder. and they said they felt the ground shaking under their feet."

"Well, what then?" I said eagerly, for the man stopped.

"When they came up to it they could see nothing for smoke," said the man; "a smoke that smelt of brimstone, and then they were so frightened that they came back. Next day the parson went near to see it, and he said he believed that the spell of the devil was broken, although the house was wellnigh blown to pieces."

"When did the parson go up?"

"On Saturday, but 'twas Friday evening when the king's men went up."

"You say you heard the noise yourself?"

"Ay I 'did, and I saw more than any of them."

"What did you see?"

"I saw the devil."

"Tell me about it?"

"I'm afraid," said the man. "I've never said so much to anybody before, even to my wife; but this drop o' drink that you've given me hath seemed to fire my courage."

"Tell me and you shall have some more. Nay, your jug is empty. I will order some more."

The landlord brought a stoup of strong waters and placed it on the table, and having left us, we all drew our chairs close to the farmer, so that we could the better hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER XX

HOW I VISITED BEDFORD A SECOND TIME

"IT may be nought," said the farmer; "perhaps you, young sir, seeing you have much learning and have read wise books, may say it was nought; nevertheless I believe it was what I say it was, although there is one thing I cannot understand."

"And what do you say it was?"

"I say it was the devil."

"And what is the thing you cannot understand?"

"He had a woman with him."

"Ay, but I can understand that," remarked one of the others, who had been listening intently. "Wherever the devil is at work you always find a woman. For that matter I doubt if the devil could get on at all but for woman."

"That's true, John Trounsen," remarked the third.

"My wife is a good woman, let who will say otherwise; but for all that there's a woman in all devilry. The devil could not do his work without witches, and I doubt not he was obliged to have many witches with him at Pycroft. All that's been done there these last few years could not have been done without them."

"But what did he look like?" I asked eagerly, for as may be imagined other thoughts had come into my mind than those spoken by the simple farmers.

"Look like?" said the farmer who told the story. "Well that again seems strange. And yet I do not know. The parson says the devil can appear as an angel of light, so I do not see why he cannot appear as an old man."

"An old man?" I cried.

"Ay, an old man. This was how it happened, young master. I was passing by the Pycroft woods on Friday evening, when I heard the noise like thunder. It fairly seemed to shake the very ground. I looked around me, but I could see nothing. Then I heard something like a cackle, and on gazing around me I saw him standing a little distance from me with a woman by his side. Mind you, nothing was to be seen afore the great noise, then all of a sudden he appeared."

"Ay, that must have been the devil," remarked the man called Trounsen.

"All of a sudden, all of a sudden, just like he always comes! What did the parson say on Sunday? 'He cometh like a thief in the night,'" remarked the other.

"Did any smoke come out of his nostrils?" asked Trounsen.

"No, he was just a simple old man with a short neck and long whiskers. Ay, but you should have seen his eyes. Fire seemed to come from them."

"Did he say aught?"

"Nay, but he laughed—or rather he cackled, and then he shook his hand towards Pycroft. Ay but I was frightened."

"Did he see you?"

"Nay, he didn't, and you may be sure I made no noise."

"And the woman—what was she like?" I asked.

"Ay, there you have me again, master, for the woman was young, and I thought fair to look upon."

"Did either say aught?"

"Ay, they talked to each other in words which I could not understand; but presently I heard the woman say they must haste to Bedford, for there was work awaiting them there. But when she had spoken he shook his hand

towards Pycroft and laughed such a laugh as I never heard before."

"'What'll you find!' he said in a terrible voice. 'Perhaps a few skulls, but nought else;' and then he started, as I thought, to come where I was, so I just creeped under a withy bush, and hid myself. After that I heard no more. When I dared to creep out again nought was to be seen. He had spirited both himself and the woman away."

After this the man told his story again, but I gathered nothing new. He simply detailed for the willing ears of the others such trifles as were of no importance to me. But he had told me enough to set me thinking. The man was doubtless old Solomon. But the woman, who was she? I called to mind that on the night when I first went to Pycroft I saw not only Mistress Constance Denman in the room, but another woman. Might not this be the same woman? She must have known Mistress Constance, else they had not been together. Moreover, what might be the significance of her desire to go to Bedford? Was not this the place to which Constance had flown? Was it not natural, therefore, that some understanding existed between them?

When all was quiet in the inn that night, and the visitors had departed, I lay thinking of all that had taken place, and I felt that I must start for Bedford the next day. It was by this means only that I should again find the old man, and I blessed the lucky happening which had led me to the inn, and thus had been enabled to hear the farmer's story. Much as I cudgelled my brains, however, I was unable to get any nearer the solution of the mystery which faced me, neither could I so much as arrive at a suggestion of the truth concerning the link which bound the unknown woman at Pycroft Hall with Mistress Constance Denman. Also I was as much in the dark as to the ties which bound these women to old Solomon. Everything was a mystery, and I knew not how to explain it.

Next morning I was on horseback again. I knew that my way to Bedford lay straight through London, yet did I not deem it wise to go thither. I had not yet accomplished the thing I had set out to do, and I did not feel like going back to the Duke of York to tell what I had seen and

heard. So I determined to bear to the left until I reached the Portsmouth road, and then by riding through the little village of Wandsworth, and crossing Battersea fields, I should miss London altogether. I knew that I could obtain a ferry at Battersea, and then by riding across country I could get to Barnet without so much as being seen by any who dwelt in London town.

Although I was eager to get to Bedford I knew that I incurred great danger by going thither. Doubtless searchers would be abroad to find the man who had liberated the daughter of Master John Leslie from Bedford Gaol, and as not many days had passed since the event, the desire to capture me must be still keen. Still nothing could be done without risk. I did not slacken speed but went straight on.

I wondered much by what means old Solomon could take the woman to Bedford, seeing that his peculiar appearance would attract much attention. But I knew that he was a man of great resource, and possibly he had friends unknown to me.

It took me two days to reach Bedford, even although Black Ben might have covered the distance in less time. The truth was, however, I could not accomplish the journey in one day, and I did not wish to reach Bedford town until after dark on the second day.

I little thought when I had fled from the inn, while a crowd of men were howling after me, that I should so soon draw near the same place, yet as the sun was setting on the second day after I had left the inn where I had heard news of Father Solomon I found myself at the very place. My plans, however, did not make it a necessity for me to go so straight into danger. Rather it was my purpose to go to Goodlands, and by means of diligent inquiries to find out the things I desired to know. I did not hurry, for the sun had set in a clear sky, and I knew the twilight would last for wellnigh an hour, so Black Ben, catching my humour, walked quietly along, but we had not gone far in this way before I perceived something was afoot. There was the noise of the trampling of many feet in the near distance, while I could hear the excited manner of many voices.

I looked eagerly around me, but the trees and hedges

being in full leaf hid wellnigh everything from me. I saw however that I was nearing the place where, on the night of Mistress Constance's escape from prison, we left the main road and turned towards the narrow lane where we had been molested by the constable and his friends.

"They seem to be coming from Goodlands," I said to myself, as I tried to locate the noise of the people, and at this my heart grew cold, for I feared lest something evil had happened to the woman I had tried to befriend.

Forgetting all possible danger to myself, therefore I urged Black Ben forward, and soon I saw a number of people who as far as I could judge were much wrought upon. That they were not drunken was easy to see, for they walked circumspectly, and yet many angry cries reached me, as though there were a division of opinion among them. I had barely reached the spot where the land joined the highway when in spite of myself I gave a cry, for there, right in the midst of a motley crowd, was Mistress Constance, while on either side of her walked a constable with a truncheon in his hand. Never, if I live until I am as old as Methuselah shall I forget the look on her face, for although the sun had now set, leaving only a great golden glow in the western sky, I saw it plainly.

She was very pale, I remember, save for a pink spot that burned on her cheeks, but she showed no other sign of fear. Her lips were compressed and determined, while her eyes burned with a clear steady light. She stood perfectly straight too, and carried herself proudly, as though she were a May Queen walking amidst the plaudits of the multitude, instead of being a prisoner. Headgear she had none, but her hair hung in rich profusion around her shoulders and far down her back. Even then I caught the sheen of those curling tresses which gave her the appearance of a queen of beauty.

She paid not the slightest heed either to those who muttered angry threats against her or those who evidently sympathized with her; her eyes were fixed on the distant skies, as though her thoughts were far away.

"What are they doing with her?" I said to a man standing on the outskirts of the crowd, but I spoke like a man in a dream, for I knew quite well.

"Doing? Why, taking her to gaol again; and I warrant she does not escape again, witch or no witch!"

And now I have to make confession of that which mayhap will draw away from me the sympathy of all good people, for at that moment I, Roland Rashcliffe, realized that I loved this woman more than my own life.

"Mistress Constance!" I cried.

And then, spite of everything, a great joy came into my heart, for though she spoke no word I saw that as her eyes turned towards me they lit up with a great gladness, and she, as I thought, tried to hold out her hands towards me.

"Mistress Constance!" I repeated, and I forgot the gaping motley crowd which surged around, which I think was at that moment too curious to do anything save to stare at us in wonder. But as I spoke a second time I saw that the joy which shone from her eyes at her first sight of me passed away, and in its place came a look of terror.

"Escape! escape!" she said. "You cannot help me, and——"

But before she could finish the sentence a great yell went up from many throats.

"The man at *The Bull*!"

"The man who drugged Master Sturgeon's ale!"

"It is he who got her out of gaol!"

"Ay, we saw him taking her to Goodlands!"

These and a hundred other disjointed cries I heard, and then I was roughly seized by many hands.

"What shall we do with him?"

"Do! Why to gaol with him!"

"This will be sugar and honey to Master Sturgeon."

"Ay, and a feather in our cap when the king hears of it!"

"We'll see now if he'll laugh at us a second time."

"Do not fear," I said to her.

"I fear nothing—for myself," she replied.

"We shall be perchance taken before the king. If we are we shall be set at liberty."

But she skook her head, and after that we spoke to each other no more that night, for a few minutes later I found myself in a dark dungeon of a place, where there

was neither light to see, nor fresh air to be breathed.

As may be imagined, sleep was out of the question, and tired as I should have been under ordinary circumstances, I felt no weariness.

It must have been perchance eight o'clock when the door opened, and Master Sturgeon entered.

"Ah, young Master Jackanapes," he cried. "So your sins, like chicken, have come home to roost?"

"No, Master Sturgeon," I said looking him steadily in the face. "I so enjoyed your company when last I saw you that I have taken the first opportunity to meet you again."

"Anger me not, or it will go hard with you," he cried.

"As to that, anger me not," I cried, "or I will e'en tell the town clerk and the mayor what a fool you are. I will tell them how drunk you were, and that I could not only have set one prisoner at liberty, but every one you had under lock and key."

I saw that I had made him fear, although he put a brave face on it.

"Bah! Master Braggart," he cried, "you will see that I will not be again taken in by your boasting."

"I never said I was a zealous servant of the king, even while I became so drunk that I failed to do my duty," I replied. "As to being a braggart, Master Gaoler, I have told you nought but the truth. And this I swear, if Mistress Constance Leslie, or whatever you are pleased to call her, be not kindly treated, I will see to it that a true story of the way you conducted yourself be widely published. Ay, it shall even reach the king's ears. In which case you will no longer be a gaoler, but a prisoner."

"As to that it is my full intention that she shall be treated with all due courtesy," he replied, "but tell me the meaning of what hath taken place, young master. Who are you, and why came you to Bedford? I promise you that aught you shall say to me shall do you good rather than harm."

"As to that presently," I replied. "But will you on your part first tell me something?"

"I will tell you all that seemeth right to tell," he replied.

"Then how was the woman who was brought here with me last night taken prisoner?"

"Ay, that is easy to tell," he replied. "I had my suspicion that there might be doings at Goodlands which it might advantage me to know, so I got a warrant to search the place from cellar to cock-loft. And this, as you will see, led to good results, for truly the constables had not been in the house a minute before this daughter of Master Leslie's came to the place where the constables were, and gave herself up. Was not this mighty clever on my part?"

"And then you searched no more?" I said.

"There was nought more to search for. You see I had the house searched the day after you—you—set her free from here; but nought could I find, no not a sign of her. But I bided my time. I said, 'she will return,' and in truth she did."

"You say you did this?" I asked.

"Ay I did—that is me and the justices together."

I said nought at this, although I was sore puzzled at his words, for I thought I saw a meaning in it all far greater than he had dreamt of.

"And now tell me what you promised to tell me?" he said.

"At what hour am I to be brought before the justices?" I asked.

"At ten o'clock." he replied.

"Then I must needs think of my defence," I replied, "and you will have to wait until their worships have examined me."

This, as may be imagined, did not satisfy him, but he had to be content, for I would not answer a single question he put.

At ten o'clock the next day I was brought before the justices of Bedford, but I never dreamed, as I appeared before them, of the things I should presently learn.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHAPEL OF HERNE

THE place into which I was taken was of no great size, nevertheless a large number of people had squeezed themselves in. I judged from this that the affair had been much noised abroad, and that justices from

the whole country side had come together, so great was the interest taken. I learnt, however, that the mode of procedure was to be of no ordinary nature, seeing we were no ordinary prisoners. I was told that the justices were to examine us concerning the nature of our guilt, and then if they thought fit, either to pass us on to the assizes or to set us at liberty, just as they felt inclined. But not being versed in the ways of the law, I did not trouble much about such matters. For of this I was sure: the justices would not dare to set Mistress Constance at liberty, seeing a warrant had been out against her for a great length of time, and it was not to be expected that they would have mercy upon me, seeing I had helped the woman to liberty.

Nevertheless I knew that for the sake of their own curiosity they would be sure to ask us many questions, and in this way such matters might come to light as I much longed to know.

I saw, moreover, that we were not treated as prisoners of the period were wont to be treated. Nay more, I saw that many of the rustics gazed on us with a kind of respectful curiosity.

"Who are their worships on the bench?" I asked of a man who had conducted me into the justice room, and he pointed them out to me in a friendly way.

"That is Sir John Napier," he said, pointing to a stout choleric old man, "and that," nodding to a man with a very solemn face, "is Sir William Beecher of Howbury. The one to his left is Mr. Gery of Bushmeade, who fought with King Charles against the Roundheads, while the one on his left hand is Sir St. John Chernocke of Hulcote."

And so on, speaking to me as if I were a visitor instead of a prisoner.

"They are the greatest gentry in Bedfordshire, young master," he said confidentially, "and King Charlas himself might be proud to call some of them his friends. Not that they are easy to get over. No, no. They are terrible hard upon them as breaks the law."

I saw that Mistress Constance was not in the room when I entered and I wondered why, seeing I had been brought there just after ten, she had not also been conducted hither at the same time. But I had not to wait long, for

scarcely had I taken a careful view of what was taking place when she was led in.

There was a general "hush" as she entered, and even the justices looked curiously towards her, as though she were to be treated with all due courtesy.

Mistress Constance was still pale, except for the pink flush on her cheeks, but it detracted not one whit from her beauty.

Her lips were compressed, but not a sign of fear did she show. Not an eyelid quivered, neither did her hands tremble. Whether she saw me I know not. But she made no sign as if she did, although I thought I once saw her looking at me furtively.

I do not remember any of the formalities which preceded the trial; but when presently the chief justice called her name, she bowed in a stately way, and seemed prepared to answer any questions they might put.

"Constance Denman."

My heart grew bitter as I heard the name, and I thought I saw a look of anger cross her face.

"You are accused of attempting to stab to the heart with a knife his Grace the Duke of Albermarle, but who was at that time General Monk, and in truth did stab his secretary. Because of this a warrant hath been issued against you. Although for a long time you escaped the law, you have at length been brought to justice."

These words I have written down from memory, and although they may not be the exact words spoken, they give the sense of what was said.

She did not speak in answer to this, whereupon some one whispered to the justice who had spoken, who shook his head impatiently.

Then a man who had been writing, lifted his head and said—

"Your name is Constance."

At this she bowed.

"Daughter of Master John Leslie, of Goodlands?"

"Yes."

"Your age?"

"I was born on the 29th of June, 1640."

"You will then be twenty on your next birthday?"

"Yes."

At this there was a suppressed whisper around the justice house. "Just as I thought." "Beautiful, isn't she?" "Fancy a maid, and a lady born doing such a thing at that age;" and so on.

"On the 15th of January you were wedded to Sir Charles Denman?"

At this she did not speak.

"You must answer the question," said the chief justice.

I saw a look of terror pass across her face. Her hands clenched and unclenched themselves, while a crimson flush suffused her whole face.

"What have these questions to do with the crime of which I am accused?" she asked. "It is well known who I am. Moreover, there are certain questions which are painful, and they have nought to do with the deed of which I am believed to be guilty. Therefore be pleased to pass on!"

One might have thought she commanded the court, although she spoke in a low voice, and in a perfectly womanly way. I believe moreover that the principal justice would have saved her these questions, but the clerk insisted upon them.

"These be according to law, Sir William," he said, "and must be answered."

"You hear what the clerk saith?" replied the justice.

"I repeat the question," said the clerk. "You were married, were you not, on the 15th day of January, to Sir Charles Denman?"

She drew herself up as if to speak, but no words escaped her lips.

"How hateful the thought of the marriage is to her," I thought to myself, and my heart was full of joy at the thought of it.

At this moment there was a great confusion in the court, and I saw that all eyes were turned towards the door.

"Master John Leslie!" was whispered all over the place.

A man past his prime made his way towards the bench, and I saw at a glance that he must be related to Mistress Constance. He had the same cast of features, and although

there were signs of weakness on his face which did not appear on that of his daughter, he was a man of noble appearance.

"I pray you to forgive my tardiness, Sir William," he said, nodding to the chief justice, "but it was far past midnight when the news was brought to me in London that my daughter was to be brought before you to-day. Since then I have ridden without ceasing so as to be here in time for—for the trial."

I thought then that this man would do his daughter harm rather than good by appearing in this way, for I saw looks of anger and dislike pass across the faces of some of the justices.

"Your presence is of no great importance, Master Leslie," said the justice drily, "and it seems a pity that you have journeyed all the way from London for nought. Besides, you hinder the procedure. The question is just asked whether your daughter married Sir Charles Denman, and I think she can answer it as well as you."

I saw the eyes of father and daughter meet, and as far as I could judge she seemed to wish him to be silent, but of this I was not sure. I thought, however, that he paid no heed to her wishes, for he turned to the bench with a look of resolution in his eyes.

"You have asked whether my daughter is the wife of Sir Charles Denman," he said excitedly. "I will even answer you. She is not."

"Father!"

The cry which came from Mistress Constance was as I thought full of pain.

"Be silent," cried Master Leslie. "Our God is a God of truth, and I will no longer suffer a falsehood to be believed."

"Whose wife is she then?"

"She is no man's wife."

There was a silence like unto the silence of death in the room as he spoke, every one there seeming to be afraid to breathe.

"I speak the truth, Sir William," went on Master Leslie. "As you know I am not a man to utter light words. You have had occasion to say so more than once as we have

sat side by side in this Chapel of Herne, the justice hall of Bedford. So you may e'en take that down, Master Cobb"—this to the clerk of the peace—" for what I have told you is the truth."

I looked at Mistress Constance's face again as he spoke, and for the first time I saw fear in her eyes. She evidently dreaded something which was of a fearful nature, and I sorely pitied her. Yet was my heart filled with such a joy as I had never known before. In truth it seemed to me that a great burden had rolled from my life, for it was no longer a sin to love her. I no longer hated Sir Charles Denman as I hated him before, even although my mind was filled with a great wonder at the meaning of it all.

I could see that the presiding justice was so astonished that he could not speak, while Master Cobb, the clerk of the peace, seemed busily writing, only to scratch out what he had written.

" I pray you, Master Leslie," went on Sir William Franklin, the presiding magistrate, " to speak plainly on this matter. You say that this woman is not the wife of Sir Charles Denman, and that she is no man's wife. Do you also say that it is not she who hath attempted the life of General Monk ? "

" I do say it, Sir William ; she hath attempted no man's life, and is as innocent of the whole matter as a babe but last night born."

" Then what meaneth all this turmoil ? Why hath the warrant been issued ? Why hath she been captured and brought hither ? "

I saw that he was much excited and that because of it he forgot much of the usual formalities of asking questions. I judged too that Master Cobb, seemed to be hesitating between his desire to conduct the affair after the usual order, and his great curiosity concerning what Master Leslie was saying.

" If you, Sir William, will come with me apart for a moment, I will explain all these matters to you," said Master Leslie, whereupon the other justices protested, declaring that such was not the law of our land. So Sir William had to concede that which was evidently against his desire to his brother justices.

"What's said must be said in the open court," he said. Then realizing that he had been conducting the affair in an unusual way he went on—

"Moreover, it is not you who are at present under examination. If you elect to give evidence after the prisoner hath been examined I will allow you to do so."

"Then let me say this," said Master Leslie, "whatever my daughter may deny, or whatever she may refuse to tell, I shall e'en take a straight course and tell everything which appertaineth to this business."

Upon that Master Leslie took a seat as near to his daughter as he was able, while Master Cobb, evidently relieved that events were to take a lawful course again, prepared to ask questions.

Again I looked around this little whitewashed hall, and looked at the eager faces of the crowd. I have been told that many trials of note had taken place in this Chapel of Herne, which was a building associated with the Grammar School, and used as a justice court, but I doubt if ever one caused more eagerness than that in which we were now engaged.

"I have asked you whether you were married to Sir Charles Denman. Will you answer?"

"My father hath told you. There is, therefore, no need for me to reply."

"But it is necessary you should. Please tell the bench."

"No, I have never married him."

"Are you guilty or not guilty of attempting the life of General Monk?"

She looked at her father before replying, and reading in his face the resolution to tell everything, she replied—

"I am not guilty."

"But you were seen in his house, you wounded his secretary."

"That is not true."

"What evidence have you whereby you can prove your innocence?"

"I can prove that I was not in London at all at that time."

"Where were you then?"

"I can answer that when I am brought before a proper tribunal."

"Do you assert that this is not a proper tribunal?"

"Yes. If it were, my accuser should be here to accuse me. You have no right to try me here at all."

At this there was some discussion, and I believe that Master Cobb maintained that in the strict meaning of the law, it was the duty of the justices to detain her until she was formally charged by her accusers, but they were too curious to allow this, so they went on with the trial.

"You say you can prove that you were not in London at the time of the attempted murder?"

"I can."

"Where were you at the time?"

"Answer, answer," said Master Leslie eagerly.

"I was in my father's house at Barnet."

"You say you can prove this?"

"I can prove it, Sir William, for I was myself there at the time. Also there be servants who can take oath to it."

This was spoken by Master Leslie eagerly.

"Then how came you to be accused of this crime?"

A great fear came into her eyes again, and she looked towards her father pleadingly.

At this Master Leslie spoke again.

"I have more than one daughter, Sir William, and if this guilt is to be fastened on one of them, it must be fastened upon my daughter Dorcas, who married Sir Charles Denman, and who lived in London. Thus, my daughter here, knew nought of the outrage until after it was committed."

"But General Monk's secretary heard her say she was called Constance Denman."

"I will explain that, although, as my daughter saith, this is not the proper tribunal for her to be judged, but I will tell the truth so that you may see that you do wrong by detaining her as a prisoner. My daughter Dorcas is the wife of Sir Charles Denman, as I have said. God hath not been pleased to give her the faculties of mind which He hath been pleased to give to my daughter here, and she became the slave of the man she married. It was her husband who commanded her to assume the garb of this my daughter here, it was her husband who commanded her to make it known that she was called Constance.

Then," and here Master Leslie's voice became tremulous, "after she had escaped, my daughter Constance, who hath been unjustly imprisoned, in order to save her sister, so great is her love for her, assisted her to keep in safe hiding, and even appeared with Sir Charles Denman as his wife, in order to attract all suspicion upon herself, and save her sister."

There was a silence which could almost be felt as he said this, and I saw that the face of Mistress Constance was pale, as I thought with fear and shame.

"Thus my daughter here is guilty of nought save of a great and overmastering love for her sister," went on Master Leslie. "To save her she hath allowed herself to be hunted like a fox, to save her she hath travelled alone with her sister's husband."

The place had ceased to be a court of justice, and there was scarcely a man there but who forgot that nought was being conducted as the law provided.

"By this means she hath succeeded up to now in diverting attention from her sister, neither would she even now have told what I have told."

"This is a strange story, Master Leslie," said the presiding justice.

"It is strange," said the other, "but I could not stand by and see my innocent child suffer for her sister, and that is why I rode hither through the night, so that she might be set at liberty forthwith."

"And where is your guilty daughter?"

"I do not say she is guilty. Nay, I am sure she was but the tool of the man she married. But where she is now I know not, for never have I seen her since the night when the thing was attempted. All I have known is that my daughter here hath even made it known that she hath been in various places, so that she might keep any from suspecting the hiding-place of her sister. Of one thing I am sure, she is far away from here, else had not my daughter Constance given herself up here in Bedford. Therefore I pray you, Sir William, to let her return to my house at Goodlands, until I can prove to his Majesty's judges that she was not in London on the night when General Monk was in danger of his life."

At this there was again a consultation among the justices, and I verily believe that had not Master Leslie taken part in the king's father's death, they would have done even as he had asked, but several of them were strong Royalists, and hated Master Leslie and all his ways, while the others who had sympathy with him were afraid that when the matter came to the king's ears, he would be displeased at such a course of action.

So it was presently decided that, although the case had taken an unusual course, nought had yet been proved, and that seeing the king had taken especial interest in the matter, he must be informed as to what had taken place, and that meanwhile Mistress Constance must be confined in Bedford Gaol until the will of those in high places had been made known.

When the matter of my own imprisonment was brought forward it was decided that as I was evidently in league with Mistress Constance, and that as I had been guilty of a grave breach of the law, I must also be kept in prison until their worships had heard from London as to what should be done with me.

A little after noon, therefore, I was back in my prison again, and if the truth must be known, glad to be alone that I might think over what I had heard. For surely I had enough wherewith to puzzle my head. It is true the revelations which had been made had made clear many things which I had been unable to understand, yet many more remained in darkness, and in spite of many hours of thought I could see but little light.

Nevertheless, there was no happier man in Bedford than I, for although I knew that Mistress Constance cared nought for me, the way she had looked at me in the court proved that, I could think of her and love her without sin. And this I did until my heart ached with very loving.

For four days I neither saw nor heard aught of her, for the gaolers would speak no word, neither did Master Sturgeon come near me, but at the end of the fourth day I was told it was the king's will that we should proceed to London town without delay.

CHAPTER XXII

THE JOURNEY TO WINDSOR

A GREAT crowd gathered around the gaol at Bedford to see Mistress Constance Leslie and myself start for London. This was but little wonder, for the revelation made in the Chapel of Herne had spread like wildfire, and people had come from the whole country side to see us depart. I noticed too that we were not regarded with anger, nor treated with contumely. Rather I judged that Mistress Constance was looked upon with great favour, and I verily believe that had they been encouraged, the people would have cheered her with great gusto, for they looked upon her, not as one who had done aught to be ashamed of, but as one who had bravely suffered much for another's sake. As for myself they knew nought of me except my name, for this I had made known in the Court House, and that I had succeeded in helping Mistress Constance out of prison. Neither was this regarded as a great sin. Indeed it was believed that I knew of the truth of what Master Leslie had told, and therefore it was natural for me to render what help I was able. Concerning our former meeting I had of course been silent, and although I had been questioned closely I had given no answer which made any one the wiser.

One thing pleased me beyond measure, and this was the fact that Black Ben was returned to me, and that I was allowed to ride him to London. This I suspect was owing to the kindness of Sir William Franklin, who had known my father and had fought by his side during the first civil war.

We were, however, carefully guarded, so carefully that quite a company of armed men rode out of Bedford, making as I thought a good show that bright summer morning.

We must have travelled at least six miles before I had a chance of speaking to Mistress Constance, for although we rode side by side in the midst of those who guarded us, we had no chance of speaking a word to each other. For that matter I do not think she desired speech, for either she looked straight forward, or else looked away to the right, which was in the opposite direction from where I was.

When we had travelled a few miles, however, we were less closely watched. The constables talked with each other, now and then passing a jest, and again telling of the fine times they hoped to have when they reached London. Indeed I saw that while they took care there was no chance of escape, they paid us less and less heed.

Therefore as I had opportunity, I drew my horse so close to hers that my right foot almost touched her riding habit.

"I trust I have done nought to offend you," I said, looking into her face.

But she did not reply for several moments, but rather turned away her head from me.

"When you speak to me look straight on," she said.

I saw the wisdom of her words, for although the guard was more lax than when we left Bedford, I knew that watchful eyes were constantly upon us. I therefore obeyed her, and waited for her answer.

"How can I be offended when you have tried to be my friend?" she asked; "but did you not tell me that you spoke the French tongue?"

"Yes," I replied in that language. "I do not speak freely, but perhaps enough to make you understand."

"Then speak to me in that tongue. You can understand now why I could tell you nothing when we first met."

"Yes," I replied, "I understand. It has made me very happy."

She gave me a searching glance. It was only for a moment that she looked, but I felt the beat of my heart quicken.

"There is much that you do not know—cannot know."

"I know enough to make me very happy," I repeated. "Almost ever since I saw you first I have felt a great burden upon my heart. Now it is gone."

"You believed I was guilty of—of——" here she stammered, and seemed at a loss how to finish her sentence, but I noticed the bitterness of her voice.

"No," I interrupted eagerly. "Never for one moment."

I thought her eyes grew softer, for I could not help looking at her as I spoke.

"Why then have you been made happy?"

"Because I know you are not the wife of that man."

The blood mounted to her cheeks, and the moment I saw this I turned away my head.

"You have been very good to try and help me," she said, "but it does not avail, it will not avail."

"I have done nothing," I replied, "nothing to what I would do if I could."

"Yes, you have done much. You have helped me to save my sister."

"Unconsciously," I replied. "I know nothing of her. If I had known I should not have cared. It was only you I wanted to help."

"It does not matter about me. She must be saved whatever may happen. I will see to that."

"Then you do not fear what the king may do?"

"No, I do not fear. But do not speak again, the men are beginning to watch us."

I pretended to be examining Black Ben's saddle, and to attend to one of the buckles which kept up the left stirrup.

"What's the matter Master Rashcliffe," said one of the guards.

"Hath some one been meddling with my stirrups?" I asked. "They seem too short."

"They can be seen to when we stop at mid-day for food," he replied.

After that we rode on for another mile without speaking.

"I think I shall have some favour with the king," I said presently. "If so, you will soon be free."

"Perchance you will be free, but not I," she replied.

"If I am free you shall be free," I made answer.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because the king's prisons will be guarded too closely. London gaols are not like Bedford Gaol."

"But why should you be put in a London gaol? You have done nothing."

"No; but then I shall tell nothing."

"Ah," I said, catching at her meaning. "Then you know where your sister is?"

I spoke the French tongue and in a low voice, but she looked around nervously, and although she gave no answer I knew I had surmised the truth.

"Do not expect the worst," I said, "God lives."

"Yes, God lives, and I do not fear. Let the king do his worst."

"He may not suspect."

"But he will. When it is told him that I have—have done these things for my sister's sake, he will ask me if I know where she is."

"And you will not tell?"

"I shall not tell where she is. Then he will make me bear her punishment."

"No, I will save you."

Again she looked at me searchingly, and I thought I saw a glad light leap into her eyes. After that she gave a quick glance round as if to be sure that no one listened.

"No, you cannot save me. I am my father's daughter. Even now I am told that the king is planning a terrible vengeance on those who took part in his father's death."

"I will save you," I said quietly. and confidently. "Do not fear. Whatever happens do not fear. It may be that I shall not be able to do this in a day, or in a year—although I think I shall, but I will do it!"

"Why should you do it?"

"Because I love you."

I saw her start in her saddle, while her hands clutched her bridle rein nervously.

"That was why I was made so happy when I knew you had not married that man. I loved you even while I thought you were his wife. I fought against it because I thought it was a sin. But I could not help it. It never came to me until the other night when I saw them taking you to prison. I loved you before then although I did not know it. But I knew it then. I was glad when they left me alone in prison, because I could think of you. I did not sleep all the night. My heart was aching with love, all the more because I thought it was sinful, but I could not help loving you. Whatever happens now, I shall love you till I die."

"No! No!"

"Yes. I know you do not care for me; but I have my joy, the joy of loving."

"But you must not—it is wrong."

"Why is it wrong?"

"Because it is foolishness. I have taken another's burden—I may speak of it now. I have taken it willingly—gladly, but the burden means a curse to the one who bears it."

"Then I will try and bear some of the curse. Nay, do not deny me this. I must whether I will or not. Nothing you may say or do will alter me. I shall love you until I die. Besides, I am going to save you."

"Why? Why?" I heard her whisper presently.

"Because God would have it so," I made answer. "He brought us together that I might love you, and serve you. And this I will do as long as I have life and thought!"

"But if I am thrown into prison?"

"I shall still love you. Prison is nothing. Love has broken the bolts from many a prison door before this, aye, and will again."

"But what is the use of loving me?"

"To serve you."

"But if you cannot serve me?"

"Then I shall still have the joy of loving you. This let me say: what will happen I know not, but you must not be afraid. I shall be always thinking about you—always."

"But the king may keep me in prison for years."

"He will not; but if he does, what then? He cannot live for ever. Suppose we never meet again until we are old, I shall still love you."

Again there was a long silence between us, so long that I thought she had forgotten all I had said, so long that my mind had begun to wander. I had begun to paint pictures of the future years when we, both grown old, had met again, and I had renewed my vows to her.

"But if I were to love another, and wed him, what then?" She said this suddenly, as though the thought had just occurred to her.

"I don't know," I said, and my heart grew cold as I spoke. "Of course you can never love me, but I shall pray God that you may never love another."

"Love is not for me," she said presently; and I knew she was thinking of what might happen to her.

"If I were only worthy it would be," I said. "I have learnt many things since that night before the trial in the Chapel of Herne. I have learnt that love laughs at the wisdom of the wise. Do you know that the walls of Bedford Gaol troubled me not one whit, nor did the presence of the gaolers keep me from seeing your face. We are guarded now on the right hand, and on the left. We can hear the rough laugh of those who watch over us, can hear the clanking of their spurs, and the noise of horses' hoofs, but for two hours I have never thought of them. We have our life in our own hearts—that is why."

After that we spoke not a word to each other throughout that long day, for our keepers began to guard us more jealously, especially when they discovered that they could not understand the language we spoke. My heart hungered for further speech with her, nevertheless I was happy. I had told her of my love and she was not angry; nay more, my promise to help her seemed to give her confidence.

I noticed presently that we were not going straight to London town, but that we took a road to the right. I asked the reason for this; but no reply was given me. For that matter, the constables on guard seemed as much in the dark as I, and this set me wondering all the more.

We kept up a brisk pace all the day, travelling as I should judge, with the exception of the time we stopped at a wayside hostelry for food and refreshment, eight miles an hour. The road, especially when we left the highway to London, was none of the best, being, in truth, little more than track. Still we kept up good speed, and presently, when I saw the towers of Great Castle I judged the reason why we had turned aside from the high road.

"That is Windsor," I said to myself. "It is as I thought; we are to be taken to the presence of the king."

I looked towards Mistress Constance Leslie, and I perceived that she had also seen the castle. Perchance she also had drawn the same conclusion. But she showed no sign of fear. The same steady light burnt in her eyes, while I knew from the steady compression of her lips that although Charles Stuart might be a hundred times king he would not be able to bend her will.

Even although I thought much of what might befall

us when we were brought into the king's presence, I could not help comparing the fortunes of Charles Stuart with those of a few months before. Then he dared not come near the land, which he in spite of his banishment called his own, while now he reigned in a royal palace. Then, under the sway of Oliver Cromwell, he could have found but few to do his bidding, but now each man vied with the other to be foremost in fawning servility. In like manner, moreover, had the whole tone of the country changed. The Puritan garb, and the Puritan manner of speech which had been so common, were scarcely anywhere present. A rollicking devil-may-care attitude had taken the place of sober seriousness.

I paid but little heed to the happenings near Windsor town, and Windsor Castle. My eyes were too constantly fixed on the woman I loved, and my heart was too full of fear lest some discourtesy might be paid to her. But I believed then, as I believe now, that command had been given for her to be treated as became her rank, rather than as one who had offended the king, for during the whole journey I neither saw nor heard anything which could give her pain.

We went straight to the Royal Palace, the beauty of which impressed me greatly as I drew near to it. Nought, I think, could be fairer than the broad park lands, studded with stately oaks, amongst which deer frolicked and gambolled. Flowers bloomed everywhere, and the air was laden with their perfume.

As we rode along I heard gay laughter, and I could have sworn I saw the king with a company of ladies standing by a broad stretch of water, throwing food to the birds which swam gracefully around.

A few minutes later we were in the Castle itself. This surprised me greatly, for I fancied we should be taken to one of the houses near, and lodged there until it was the king's pleasure to see us; but as I said we were taken straight to the Castle, although not to one of its main entrances.

Directly I had entered, however, I lost sight of Mistress Constance. This distressed me sorely, but I comforted myself with the thought that as she had been treated

with such kindness throughout the journey she would not now receive aught but civility.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHARLES II AS A JUDGE

WHETHER special arrangements had been made for our coming I know not, but as I judged the whole party of ladies and gallants who had gathered around were seated as if in expectation of being entertained. Moreover, many curious eyes were upon me as I entered, as though my coming were of some importance. The king, however, scarce took any notice of me. He gave me one keen searching glance, and then turned to a gaily dressed and handsome woman, and spoke to her I thought as if he were partly in grim earnest and partly jesting.

Evidently the party had supped in another chamber, although wine was brought in and partaken of freely both by the ladies as well as by the gaily-dressed gallants. I thought nothing of this, for even while I was in London I had heard that the king had broken down many of the rules of courtly etiquette.

I noticed that the apartment was of large proportions, and of great beauty, but which of the state rooms it was I did not know, neither for that matter do I know to this day, for this was the only occasion I have ever seen it.

I glanced from one face to another in the hope of seeing Mistress Constance, but nowhere was she visible. This disappointed me much, for although I had parted from her but a few hours, my heart fairly ached to behold her again.

"Will you stand here?"

I stepped to the place I had been bidden, and as I did so anger filled my heart, for I saw that I was made the gaping stock of all the crowd of giddy revellers who were there. I felt the blood rush to my face, but nought came to me to say. What in truth could I say? The king's black beady eyes were turned furtively upon me, while sitting in the shadow I saw the face and form of the Duke of York, the king's brother.

There could be no doubt about it. The king had brought

a royal party and their friends to Windsor, and I was brought there to give my lords and their ladies some entertainment.

For a few moments all eyes were turned upon me. Some quizzical and curious, some wondering, some laughing at my evident anger, others as if watching for what might come next.

No word was spoken to me, although I could hear them talking about me.

"Rashcliffe, you say. A good name anyway. Oh, his father fought for the Royalists in the time of the king's father, did he?"

"If he were fittingly attired he would be the bravest looking man in the room."

"He's in a temper! look! Ay, but I like him the better for that. He hath spirit. What led him to help the girl out of prison?"

"Is she to be brought here at the same time? It would be better sport so."

"He looks ready to fight any man here."

"What do you think the king will do with him?"

And so on. They knew I could hear much of what they said, and yet they discussed me as though I were the king's spaniel which I saw sat upon his Majesty's knee.

After a few minutes there was another hush, and looking towards the door I saw Mistress Constance enter. The light of the candles did not make the great apartment very bright; but I saw that she had been in the hands of a tiring woman, who had dressed her with great care. She was attired more plainly than they, although I doubt if any were dressed with more beauty. Her hair, moreover, was carefully arranged after the fashion of the times, and I saw it gleam in the candlelight.

Every eye in the room was upon her, and no wonder. Fair as were many of the court dames who had gathered there, not one of them could compare with Mistress Constance. Her face was flushed, half I thought with anger, for she as well as I must have realized that she was brought there to give the king pleasure as well as to be judged for what she had done. In truth the whole matter seemed to me at that moment as mere play-acting. This was no

judgment hall at all. It was a gathering of the king's friends, and the king thought to entertain himself and them by what should take place.

Nevertheless I saw that she was in no mood to be trifled with. Her eyes shone with a steady light, and I knew by her compressed lips that she meant to bear whatever ordeal through which she had to pass, without fear. Her movements, moreover, showed no excitement. She walked steadily into the compartment, carrying herself as though she were a queen. The women there saw this as well as I, and if they envied her it was no wonder, for a more beauteous face, or a nobler formed maiden surely never stood before a king.

I turned and took one look at Charles, and I noted that his eyes were opened wider than was their wont, and there was a look in them for which I would gladly have killed him. His pale, fleshy face was eager, too, as though he were vastly enjoying himself. For a moment he seemed to forget the dog he had been fondling, as well as the handsome woman to whom he had been speaking.

"Lucy Walters must have been fair indeed if she were fairer than she."

Who said this I do not know, but it raised my anger almost to madness to think that the woman I loved should be mentioned in the same breath with the mother of the lad who might one day be king of England. In the eyes of some of the women was jealousy, and I saw them draw up their shoulders disdainfully, yet they never took their eyes from Mistress Constance's face. As for some of the young gallants, they looked as if they would devour her beauty by a glance.

For a moment the king seemed at a loss what to say. I thought I saw him open his mouth to speak more than once, and then close it again, as though he had chosen the wrong words. Presently, however, he turned to some one, and said—

"Bring a chair for the fair maid to sit on. She hath travelled far to-day, and although she gives no sign of it, must be weary."

A chair was placed close by where I stood, and Mistress Constance came and sat down as though she were the

king's guest, rather than as a prisoner waiting to be judged.

"We have heard strange things concerning you," said the king as she sat, and I saw that his black, beady eyes were still upon her, while his lips parted with a smile. "You see, however, that we are not very angry, and thus you are bidden to be seated in the king's presence."

Mistress Constance did not speak at this, although each one there was silent, waiting, I doubt not, to hear what she might say.

"In truth, so little are we angry," he went on, "especially after hearing of your brave deeds, that we would have you come and kiss our hand, rather than think of yourself as a prisoner."

I think my heart almost stopped beating at this, for king though he was, his profligacy was freely spoken of, even by those who cared most for him, and it was torture beyond words to think of the woman I loved kneeling before him and kissing the hand which he would have extended.

"I dare not so honour myself," said the maid quietly, and her voice seemed to me as music. "For while I greatly rejoice in Your Majesty's kindness, yet do I remember that I was taken from prison to be brought here, in which prison I have been immured for days."

"This is strange," said the king with a smile, "for truly I do feel like granting you forgiveness for aught you have done, even before I hear what you may say in your own defence. Had I been a justice at Bedford the trial would have been short, and I doubt not but you would have been as free as the nightingale which sings among the trees yonder."

Even as he spoke we could hear the song of the nightingale, for the windows were open, and the night was still. Moreover, so great was the silence in the room, save for the voice of the king, that one could have heard a pin drop.

But Mistress Constance did not speak in answer to this, and in truth there seemed nought for her to say.

I thought I saw Charles Stuart's face harden at her silence, and I fancied that he might be thinking of her father, as indeed I believe he was by the question which he next asked.

"Your name is Mistress Constance Leslie, daughter of one John Leslie, who is by right of descent a baronet, although he useth not his title?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I hear that you have a sister?"

"Yes, sire."

"And she is wedded, I hear, to one Sir Charles Denman?"

She bowed as if in assent to this.

"Is she your elder sister, or is she younger than you?"

"She is older than I, sire."

"Ah, I should have judged so. And right glad am I that you are not wedded to this plotting, sour-faced Puritan. That would have been indeed a sore pity. A clown with a travelling show might as well be wedded to a princess. Is your sister as fair as you?"

"Fairer," replied Constance.

"Nay, nay, that is impossible," and the king smiled upon her, and as he smiled I hated him, for it was the smile of a bad man.

"You see," he went on, "that we are not treating you like one who hath been guilty of great naughtiness, rather, we have brought you to our own house, amongst our own friends. Nevertheless, it is known that the king must do justice to all, and we promised his Grace of Albermarle that this matter should be looked into. You say then that it was not you, but your sister, the wife of the man Denman, who made this murderous attack upon him."

"I have never said so, sire."

"What!"

I noticed the change in the king's tone, and saw that his beady eyes became hard.

"I have never said so, sire."

"Then do you plead guilty to the charge?"

"Else why should I have flown from General Monk's anger?"

For a moment Charles was silent, as though he knew not what to say, but presently he burst out laughing.

"Why, here, my lords and ladies, is a strange thing," he said; "and in truth it is worth coming to England to see. The sight of one who seeks to bear the shame of another is

surely rare. Come closer, fair Constance, and let me have a closer look at thee!"

Again I wondered what she would do, for if I saw evil in the king's eyes, so also, I believe, did she.

"I may not come closer to Your Majesty," she said.

"And why prithee?"

"I am afraid to dazzle my eyes too much."

The king did not notice the scorn in her voice, else he had been angry. Instead he laughed gaily.

"We must do something to help you, fair Constance, he said, "for you please us much, and I would fain have you near me often. Nevertheless, justice is justice, and I must e'en keep my word and probe this thing to the bottom. Now whether it was you or another who sought to lay murderous hands upon the Duke of Albermarle can easily be proved. What say you, Your Grace? You say you saw the woman; can you assert that it was those pretty hands which held the bloody knife?"

I turned and saw the Duke of Albermarle. He had been standing in the shadow, so that I had not recognized him, but now he stood out clearly, and I noted that his dark searching eyes travelled slowly up and down Constance's form.

"No, Your Majesty, it was not she. At first I thought it was, for truly the other is like her; but there is much difference, and the longer I look the more difference do I see. The murderous woman was not so tall as this fair maid by at least three inches, neither are the features altogether alike, although there is a resemblance."

"You could take your oath on this, Albermarle?" said the king.

"Certainly, Your Majesty."

"Ah then, we have made the first step in our voyage of discovery. So you see, fair Mistress Constance, although you would condemn yourself you cannot get another to condemn you. And truly this is a strange thing, for hitherto I have found it true, especially of women, that they be always ready to excuse themselves, while others be always ready to blame them. Master Killigrew, here is a subject for a poem, and see that it is fittingly done."

At this moment I looked again at Constance's face, and

for the first time I beheld fear. I saw her lips trembling, while in her eyes there was a look of terror, as though she would fain have escaped.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, then you pronounce me innocent?"

"Ay, innocent of that fair Constance. Not that I have doubted it from the first moment I saw you. Yet have I to ask these questions that no man might doubt."

"Then I may even go my ways and rid Your Majesty of my presence?" she said eagerly.

"Nay, nay, not so soon, fair maid," said Charles. "It is not so oft that one heareth speech so pleasant. Besides the matter is not dealt with yet. Tell me, I pray thee, how thou didst accomplish this, and how thou didst so long evade thy pursuers?"

For a moment Constance hesitated, while the king watched her, a smile half of irony, and half of merriment being upon his lips.

"Is it your will that I shall tell you this, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"Ay, that it is. I would not that my lords and ladies should miss such a story. Its matter must be, I am sure, strange to them."

"There is little to tell, Your Majesty; besides it was very easy."

"You mean that your pursuers were such fools?" said the king with a laugh. "Ay, I can well believe it. But to your story. And mark you I have become so accustomed to listen to lies that I can detect one from afar."

I saw anger gleam from Constance's eyes as he said this.

"Even although I tried to save my sister, I have never lied concerning it," she cried.

"Nay?" said the king smiling. "Truly your conversation becomes more and more interesting. Truth is so rare. Pray listen carefully my lords and ladies."

"When my sister came to my father's house, having done this thing, I e'en clothed myself in her attire, and then having showed myself to her pursuers, I escaped."

"And they followed you?"

"Ay, they followed me."

"Ah; but this is a rare jest!" said the king laughing

"Truly the most of mankind is made up not only of knaves, but of fools. But how did you escape them?"

"Oh, it was night and I knew ways which they did not."

Again the king laughed, and then continued, "And now, Mistress Constance, there is but one other thing I would ask, and if thou answerest truly, although thou art the daughter of a man whom I find it hard to forgive, thou shalt be free as air. Dost thou know where this sister of thine is now?"

I knew this was the question which Constance dreaded, but she answered bravely.

"I do Your Majesty."

"Then tell me."

She was silent.

"Come, speak plainly."

"Nay, Your Majesty, I cannot tell you that."

"But I command."

Still Constance was silent, and I thought the king would have given way to his anger.

Presently he burst into a laugh, but the laugh had but little mirth in it. He made me think of a dog who showed his teeth even while he wagged his tail.

"Ah, then we must e'en find out ourselves," he said, and there was a snarl in his voice, although the mocking smile had not left his lips.

"Young Master Rashcliffe may be able to give us some information," he continued, and he turned suddenly to me. "Here methinks is also a strange freak of nature, for verily on the day we landed at Dover, we asked Master Rashcliffe if he desired aught as a favour from the king, but he answered no. Our brother of York, however, cannot say the same for his father. Come, Master Rashcliffe, can you tell us where Mistress Constance's sister is? Dorcas, I believe, is the name given to her."

"I know not, Your Majesty," I replied.

"Come, that is a brave answer, and perchance a true one. Yet it may cover up a big lie. Have you any suspicion where she is?"

At this I was silent, for I believed I knew where the woman was in hiding. I remembered what the farmer had told me at the inn near Pycroft. I recalled the words which

the woman who was with old Solomon had said—"We have need to go to Bedford." I had also believed that the reason Constance had given herself up to the constables who came to search the house at Goodlands was that she was afraid they might find her sister. Nevertheless I was not silent long, for I knew this would arouse suspicion.

"I have no knowledge whatever where she is, Your Majesty."

"I did not ask for your knowledge but your suspicion," said the king angrily. "Tell me, do you believe, do you think, have you a fancy that you know where she is hiding?"

I was silent, for what in truth could I say?

The king laughed quietly. "It seems there are two who would defy justice," he said. "Well, well, we shall see! But let us return a little way. For what purpose did you seek to set this maid at liberty when she was first put into Bedford Gaol?"

"Because I believed she was imprisoned unjustly," I answered boldly.

"Ah, I see. You thought yourself wiser than others. Had she told you that she was innocent of the charge laid against her?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Nor given you hint of it?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Did she tell you of what she was accused?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Ah, ah. The mystery deepens; but depend upon it we shall unravel it. You were in Dover on the day of our landing, and yet the next night you were in Bedford. You were there to set her at liberty. How did you hear of her imprisonment?"

"I heard it spoken of at Dover."

"And then like a brave knight you rode away to set her free. Ah, well, I like you none the worse for that. You have brains, and you have decision. But this means that you had met her before. Where?"

"Near Dover, sire."

"What did she there?"

"She never told me, sire."

"Reports have reached me that you have been seen near an old house called Pycroft, which is not a long ride from Dover. Did you see her there?"

"Yes, sire.'

"Ah! that is better. Why did you go there?"

"I do not think Your Majesty would be pleased if I told you."

"That is possible, ay likely. Such as you often do that which might not please me. But tell me."

"If I tell you I would rather speak to your private ear," I said.

"Ay, and fancy you could get off a cock-and-bull story upon me. Nay, nay, methinks we are getting to the bottom of this thing. Now then, what led you to go to Pycroft?"

"I had heard that there was something of great import there."

"Ah, that is fine. But why should it displease me?"

"Because it had to do with Your Majesty."

"With me. With me. From whom did you hear of it in the first place?"

"From a woman named Katharine Harcomb," I replied boldly.

Charles Stuart started as though a wasp had stung him, and then he shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

"I am weary of this," he said, "for the thing hath ceased to be sport. Let this boy and girl be securely guarded until I have time to look into the matter carefully." And then he turned negligently to the woman with whom he had been speaking, while the others in the company exchanged meaning glances.

It was near midnight that same night when I was brought before the king again.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE JUDGMENT OF THE KING

IT came about in this wise. I had been taken away by myself into an empty chamber, which was carefully guarded. Not that I was treated rudely. Rather marked

respect was paid to me, and I lacked nothing which any man might desire. Nevertheless I had thought much of the scene through which I had been passing, and what it all portended. I could not help realizing that the king had dismissed us very abruptly, and that sore displeasure had rested upon his face as I had spoken. As for Constance, her condition troubled me more than my own. I had noted the look in the king's eyes as he had watched her, and remembering what men said concerning him, I feared much. I determined however that no harm should happen to her, whatever might befall, for did I not love her with all my heart, and had I not told her of my love? Moreover I had promised that I would protect her, and as I thought of this, even prison walls became as nought to me. It was while I was scheming how I should fulfil my promise to her that a lackey entered the room and bade me follow him.

This I did like a man in a dream, for a great silence had fallen upon the king's palace, and everything appeared grim and ghostly. He led me through long corridors, and tortuous ways, so that without a guide I doubt if I could ever have found my way back to the room from which I had come. Presently, however, I heard the sound of distant laughter, and the noise of songsters, then as some intervening wall kept these sounds from reaching me, I passed by an open window, and heard the nightingales singing amongst the trees close by.

The lackey spoke no word, neither good nor bad, to me. I thought he looked sleepy, and would gladly have gone to his rest. Perhaps this was true, for it was rumoured that the king kept strange hours, and expected peculiar service at the hands of his servingmen.

Presently I stood in a little ante-chamber, where I was bidden to wait until it was the king's pleasure to see me, and here I waited I should think a full hour. The first part of the time was weary enough, but the second part passed like a flash of light, and this was because, even although I had tried not to listen, I had to hear that which interested me past words.

Evidently I was close to the apartment where the king was, for every word he spoke reached me with great plain-

ness ; but it was not his voice which thrilled my heart, it was another's, as I shall soon have to tell.

"I pray thy pardon, pretty maid," I heard Charles say. "I know thou hast had a long day's ride, and must be aweary, but I felt I could not sleep until I had speech with thee again."

"I have nothing to say to Your Majesty," replied the voice of Constance.

"But I have much to say to thee, fair Constance. It is not oft that even a king beholds one so fair, or hears one whose speech is so pleasing. Besides, it will be to thine interest to listen to me, and to regard my proposals favourably."

The king's voice was, as I thought, thick with much wine, and I fancied I could see the evil leer in his black beady eyes as he spoke.

"I have brought thee here to-night," he went on, "so that I may tell thee of many things. And first, I desire that thou shouldst tell me what thou didst refuse but a few hours since. Where is this Puritan sister of thine ?"

"And if I told Your Majesty ?"

"Ah, pretty Constance, if it had been thee—well I fear thou wouldst have too lenient a judge. But thy sister is the wife of Denman, a man whose immediate arrest I have commanded. A bitter, sour-faced, lying Puritan, a man who took a leading part in the murder of my father. And this sister of thine, well she tried to kill the man who sought to bring me back to my kingdom. That is not easy to forgive. Had it been thy little hand which would have done this, I should e'en have laughed at Monk's dour face, and forgiven. And yet I must not forget. Thou hast shielded thy sister ; thou hast kept her from punishment, and therefore—well, unless—but let me think——"

"I have decided to forgive thee on two conditions," he went on presently.

"And they, Your Majesty ?"

"The first is that thou wilt tell me where this sister of thine is. The second will, I trust, be pleasing to thee, for surely the king's smile, and the king's companionship should——"

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," cried Constance, "but there

is no need to speak of the second condition since I will never accept the first."

"You will not tell me where your sister is?"

"No, Your Majesty."

The king laughed. "I must e'en find out without your telling," he said.

"You never can;" and there was defiance in her voice.

"Ah!"

I noted the anger in his voice, and I forgot that I was listening to conversation which the king never intended should reach my ears, so eager was I to know what would follow.

"It is said that I am of an easy temper," he went on presently, "and it is hard to be angry in the presence of one so fair. Yet must the king be obeyed. So be sure of this, pretty Constance. I will e'en find the whereabouts of your sister. As for your father, he is already under arrest, and it will depend on you as to whether he goes to the gallows with the rest of my father's murderers, or whether he holds his head high in the state."

"On me, Your Majesty?"

"Ay, on you, pretty Constance." And then he said words which I will not write down, so base were they.

"Of this be assured," he went on, and it was easy to see that wine had unloosed his tongue, and driven away his judgment. "I will give no quarter to these canting Puritans. Neither for that matter will I bestow any favour upon these Presbyterians. I will have only such religion in my realm as I please. Not that I am much wedded to religion at all, especially that of the stern and strict nature. But this I know, it is to the Episcopals that I owe my crown, and it was they who fought for my father during the rebellion. Depend upon it, therefore, I will make short shrift of these hot-gospellers, and I will see to it that only those who are loyal to the crown shall be tolerated."

"Then Your Majesty's promises will go for nothing!" And there was a sting of scorn in Constance's tones, as well as in her words.

The king laughed. "A man makes reservations even in his promises," he said, "and think not that I am going to allow my father's murderers to go around stirring up

dissension, or hot-gospellers to preach rebellion. Nay, you will soon see. The Puritans had no mercy, and *Grand Dieu* neither will I!"

At this there was silence.

"So, fair Constance, I beseech you for your own sake to—to be obedient to my wishes, and——"

"Will Your Majesty be pleased to forgive me," cried Constance. "It ill becomes me to boast, but I am not afraid of death, and so I beseech Your Majesty to mete out my punishment without delay."

"You mean that——"

"It would be better for me to die than that my father's child should turn traitor or coward."

At this I could not help giving expression to my gladness; indeed so loud was the sound that escaped my lips that the king heard me.

"Who is there?" he cried angrily.

A minute later I was brought into the room where the king was. I saw that his usually pale face had become of a purplish hue, while his slits of eyes shot an angry light.

"How now sirrah!" he cried, as I stood before him, "hast thou heard aught of the conversation between me and this maid?"

"I heard it all, sire."

For a moment he did not speak, gazing first at Constance and then at me. I also cast a hasty glance at the woman I loved, and in spite of my helplessness my heart rejoiced. Her face was pale, but she showed no fear, rather there was a look of confidence in her eyes, and an expression of unalterable determination.

Whether Charles II. realized this I know not, but I saw he was in no humour to be played with. Perchance this was the first time his will had been opposed since he had come back to England, for since that day I had first seen him at Dover he had received little but fulsome adulation.

"Thou hast heard all!"

"All, sire," I replied steadily, for now I felt no scrap of fear. For let who will say otherwise, Charles II., although King of England, was not a man to inspire reverence or awe. He looked cunning rather than thoughtful, sensuous rather than noble; one who, if he was kind, was kind

because it was less troublesome than to be cruel. He did not impress me with his kingly presence, rather I thought of him even then as a weak despot.

He seemed to hesitate a moment as if to recall the conversation which had taken place between himself and Constance, and then as if he realized that nought of great importance was said, his brow cleared and a look of resolution came into his eyes.

"Thou knowest then that this maid, Mistress Constance Leslie, hath again refused to obey her king?"

"Yes, sire."

"But, mark you, I will know the truth. Look you, young sir, I judged that you know where her sister is. Speak the truth. I can detect a lie a mile away."

"I will tell you no lies, sire!"

"Then I repeat the question, 'Do you know where this maid's sister is?'"

"No, sire."

"But you can make a shrewd guess? Come, yes or no. You believe you know where she is?"

"Yes," I made answer.

"Ah, that is good. And now we will see, Mistress Constance, who is master. Now we will see whether the king will not have his way." And then he said that which I will not write down.

Surely, I have told myself since, he must have been brutalized by too much wine, or he would never have spoken as he did, for his speech was that of a villain in a fourth rate stage play, rather than of one in whose veins ran royal blood.

"I cannot get at you through your father," he said to her, "but I can and will through your sister. You care nothing for the old hot-gospeller; well, I can forgive you for that. But this sister of yours, well, you have suffered much for her already, and would suffer more. Ah, yes, pretty Constance, I see through you. To avert suspicion from her you have e'en gone abroad as the wife of this Denman; you have fetched and carried for him like a dog. Well, now, to save her, you shall e'en do as much and more for your king. For if you will not, I will make this sister of thine—but I will not speak of that now. You will be wise,

and do my will. Now then, Master Roland Rashcliffe, you say you can shrewdly guess where this other daughter of John Leslie is. Tell me, I command you."

The king was gazing eagerly at me as he spoke, but instead of returning his look I turned for a moment towards Constance, and I saw that her eyes were imploring me not to speak. But there was no confidence in them now; rather there was a great fear. She could depend on her own fortitude, but not on mine.

"I trust Your Majesty will not insist on this," I said.

"And why, Master Malapert?"

"Because I cannot obey your command."

He took a step towards me as if in anger, but he stopped suddenly, and then I saw a change come over his face. The old cunning leer came back to his eyes again, the wine-inflamed, passionate man had gone, and instead I saw the cynical mocking man I had seen land at Dover.

He sat down on a low chair, and began to fondle his lap-dog, glancing at us both curiously as he did so.

"I am indeed fortunate," he said. "Mostly my servants say they will obey me, and then seek to have their own will, while you say you will not obey me and will have to do so in spite of all. Moreover, this youth said he had no favour to ask at my hands. Well, and what game are you playing, young master?"

"I am trying to be an honest man," I replied.

"Prithee come a little closer, for surely thou art a rare sight," he said. "For twelve years I have been trying to find an honest man and a virtuous woman, and up to now I have discovered neither."

"And yet your mother is alive, sire," I said.

Again his eyes flashed fire, and I thought he was going to call his servants, and order that I should be thrown in some dungeon. But again he mastered himself.

"I have not made up my mind whether I shall give you the cap and bells, or send you to the most stinking dungeon in Fleet Prison, Master Rashcliffe," he said quietly. "But of that anon; at present I am vastly enjoying myself. There is some reason in your mind which makes you think you can answer your king as you have answered him.

You fancy you have some secret power over him. Come now, speak!"

"That need not be, Your Majesty. I was ever taught that a man's duty was to protect a woman."

Again he eyed me keenly, and presently he laughed quietly.

"Ah, I see," he said; "now I understand. You have cast eyes on this pretty Constance, and seek to gain her favour by this means. I thought I should discover your motive. What! she hath looked coldly on you, eh, and now you seek to win her favour. Ay, and what more likely to do this than to stand by her in her difficulty! Is a man likely to do aught but for self? Tell me, do you expect to win the fair Constance's love?"

"Nay; I do not expect that,' I replied.

"Ah, I see; but you hope, eh—you hope?" and again he laughed.

"Well, and why not, Master Rashcliffe? The king is still king in spite of these accursed Puritans; and I tell you this, Charles II. will not be ungrateful to loyal servants. General Monk is now Duke of Albermarle, is he not?"

I was silent, for why should I speak?

"Now then, suppose I promise to look favourably on his match, will you tell me where you believe this maid's sister is? Mark you, it will make no difference whether you tell me or no, for I mean to find her, if every house in England hath to be searched from cellar to cockloft. Now, will you tell me?"

"No, sire."

"Ah, then there is some other thought at the back of your brain. But mind, you are both making a whip for your own backs. It is not often I am so patient as to-night, so tempt me not too far."

At this neither of us spoke, while Charles Stuart began to play with the ribbon around his dog's neck.

"What have you to say?"

"Nothing, sire."

"Yes, there is something. Three hours ago thou didst mention the name of Katharine Harcomb. What did she tell thee?"

"Of that which I have since seen, Your Majesty," I said coldly.

"Ah—and what is that?"

"That which if made known would alter the history of the nation, sire."

"Where is it?" he cried, as if forgetting himself.

"I do not know," I replied like a fool, for the moment had spoken the words, I realized that I had thrown dow the only weapon by which I could defend myself.

The king laughed again quietly.

"You are only fit for the cap and bells after all," he sai quietly; "just the cap and bells. Still, a fool may dangerous if you put a pistol in his hands, so the best wa is to keep him out of harm."

"But others know where it is!" I cried, for his word made me angry.

"Who?" he cried.

I was silent.

"Tell me," he commanded, but I could not speak. Fo who was the old man of Pycroft? Where was he now At that moment all I had seen seemed but a Jack-o'-Bedla story, at which a cunning man like the king would laug

He seemed to hesitate what to do, but presently he ros and pulled a bell-rope, and before it ceased ringing th woman who had earlier in the evening accompanied Co stance entered the room, while I saw two male lackeys the door.

The king gave some commands in a low voice, whereupo she prepared to lead Constance away. My heart fell this, for while I was brave and confident in her presenc my courage ebbed away at the thought of her leaving m And yet it was not for myself that I feared, but for her. great dread came into my heart concerning the indigniti which I believed the king would place upon her, for I ha heard his words, I had seen the look in his black beady eye But I could do nothing. I had to stand still while she le the room, and yet on her leaving I felt my heart gro warm with joy. And no wonder, for as she walked awa she turned around, and her eyes met mine, and the although she never spoke a word of love to me, I kne that I did not love her in vain.

Let the king do his worst now, I did not fear, for I had strength and a joy of which he knew nothing.

No sooner had the door closed than the king's mood changed again.

"Now then we will speak plainly, Master Malapert," he said. "You know where this maid's sister is?"

At this I was silent, for surely there was no need of speech.

"Well, it doth not matter whether you speak or no, that is as far as it concerneth me. As for you, it mattereth much. But there is the other matter; tell me what you know concerning that?"

Whether I was wise or no I will not try to say, but I told him what I had seen.

"You say you saw this contract?"

"Yes, sire, I saw it."

"Signed by me?"

"The name of Charles Stuart was affixed to it."

He took a pen from a table and scribbled hastily on a piece of paper.

"Like that?" he asked.

"A facsimile of that, sire," I replied.

For a time he was silent, and he took several turns up and down the room, as though he were thinking.

"You knew of this when I arrived at Dover?"

"Yes, sire."

"And when you went to the place again?"

"It was gone, as I have told you, sire."

"You believe the old man hath it?"

"Yes, sire."

"And you have a suspicion where he is now?"

At this I was silent, for what could I say. I believed that he was at Goodlands, the house of John Leslie, and that his discovery would mean the discovery of Constance's sister, the sister whom she was ready to shield with her own life. Therefore, in spite of all the king's commands, I held my peace, never by so much as a word or a suggestion making known my thoughts.

Again the king grew angry, and he threatened not the wife of Sir Charles Denman, but Constance with a doom at which any honest woman must shudder, but even then I could not speak, for if ever a woman's eyes had commanded man to be silent Constance's had commanded me. Besides, I had no faith in the man before me. The promises

he made to-day would be broken at the very moment pleased his fancy.

And yet I believed that the king was not altogether di pleased with me, for even as he gave his commands co cerning me he said—

"An honest man is a good thing, Master Rashcliffe, b when he is a fool he must be e'en treated as a danger

Before the sun which was now rising went down, I w in a foul dungeon in Fleet Prison.

CHAPTER XXV

FLEET PRISON

I WAS kept in Fleet Prison for wellnigh two years; a during the first year of that time I scarce ever spoke a fellow-prisoner. Moreover, none of my gaolers ever ha speech with me. So silent were they when they brough me my meals that I judged they had been commanded t be silent. It was easy to divine a meaning in this, for if th king had bidden that no man should speak to me he woul be obeyed. And I believed that he had done this, else wh was I treated differently from all others who were immur within those grim walls? Moreover there was a reaso why he should give the command. He did not desire tha his marriage with Lucy Walters should be known; he di not wish that the boy James Croft should be spoken of the future King of England.

Of my sufferings during that year I will say but littl It is but little to a man's credit that he should make know his tale of woe, rather should he endeavour to make th best of his lot, and think of what comforts he had. An yet if I would tell my story truly I must e'en remark o the dark days I spent there, for they were dark days. F a time I almost wished that I had no hope that Constan loved me, for it seemed to make my burden harder to bea But it was only for a time. I could not help being gla because of the lovelight I had seen in her eyes, even thou the thought of it brought me pain. Even as I lay in th darkness I remembered that look, and rejoiced. N imprisonment I would not have minded one whit, if I kn

she was safe. I did not even fear her being a hunted refugee as she was when I had seen her first of all. Nay, it was the thought of what was in the king's mind that drove me well-nigh mad, and many a time while I was in prison had I wished that I had seized his fleshy neck and strangled the life out of him, even although I suffered the tortures of hell as a consequence.

But I could do nothing. Day succeeded day, and week succeeded week, and I heard not so much as a breath of a whisper. Besides I could do nothing, for my prison door was safely locked, and not a vestige of chance to hear aught of the outside world came to me.

Thus a year passed away. During that time I had grown as weak as a child. Each morning as I awoke a great nausea mastered me, and my mouth was full of bitterness, until one day one of my gaolers watched me as I was retching, and saw how faint and giddy I was afterwards, and then a change was made in my condition. I was allowed clean clothes, a big tub was brought to me so that I could bath myself, and a better cell was given me.

After this they went away, and I heard no more of them. For several days moreover there was no change in my condition, except that my prison was clean and my food a little more wholesome. At the end of a week, however, I found myself at liberty to move freely around among my fellow-prisoners.

Meanwhile, I learnt no more concerning Constance. I asked many questions, but no man could give me an answer except that the king regarded her with favour.

Not once did my father visit me, at the which I wondered greatly, for I knew that he loved me, and would not willingly allow me to remain here to die like a rat in a hole as I was like to do. One day, however, after I had been a long time here, my heart gave a great leap, for I heard his voice speaking to a gaoler, and shortly after we were alone together.

"I grieve much for you, Roland," he said presently, "and yet it is your own fault."

"My own fault, father?"

"Ay, your own fault."

"Why, what have I done?" I asked.

"You have opposed the king's will," he replied; "you have used your information like a fool."

"But perchance you do not know all that hath taken place," I said; "you do not know what the king would have had me do?"

"Ay, I have heard all. Not that the news hath long come to me, for I have only but lately arrived from France, where I have been at the behest of James of York. Had I known earlier I would have been to see you before, but I never dreamed that you would have been such a fool."

My heart grew cold at these words, for my father spoke, as I thought, strangely.

"I went away with a light heart," he went on, "for I believed that you had wit enough to make good use of whatever you should find out. I left you enough money for all needs, and I believed that when I came back I should find you in high favour with the king. Instead, I find that you have espoused the cause of the daughter of a regicide, that you have refused to obey the king's commands, and that you have acted like a fool in relation to the discovery which you made."

"What would you have had me do?" I asked.

"Do!" he replied. "Did I not tell you from your earliest childhood that no man would do aught for you, except that which would help forward his own plans? And did I not trust you to make a wise use of your knowledge? That is why I laid down no plan of action for you when we met at Dover. I said 'the boy hath all his wits, and will be able to act wisely when the right time comes.' Why, having once obtained the ear of the king, thou shouldst have gone to him after what thou didst find out, and thou shouldst have appeared before him as one anxious to serve him. He would then, in his own interests, have rewarded thee with some fair demesne and a wealthy dame's hand. Instead, what dost thou do? Thou dost become the aider and abettor of this daughter of John Leslie, and when obedience to the king would have found his favour, thou didst like a fool refuse to do his bidding. Ay, and what happened then? The king, being desirous of keeping his marriage with Lucy Walters a secret, and knowing that thou wert a dangerous fool, clapped thee into prison."

"And you, father," I said, "what have you done?"

"I have done what I meant to do," he replied. "If the son is a fool there is no reason why the father should be. I have so managed the king, through His Grace of York that I have got my old lands back, so that in spite of thine own foolishness thou wilt no longer be a landless Rashcliffe. The king's marriage with Lucy Walters was not the only card I had to play, so when my time came I played it, and I took the trick too."

At this I was silent, for somehow I felt my father to be a different man.

"If ever a man had his chances you had," my father went on. "I had known for years that Katharine Harcomb had been trying to find out through Lucy Walters' mother where the old madman Walters was, and I knew that when she found out she would come and tell me."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Because I had power over her. Because in her young days she had done that which, if I had chosen to make known, would have sent her to the gallows. Because I had made her promise that if ever she found out where old Solomon, as he called himself, was, she dared do no other than to tell me. She knew that he had got hold of the marriage contract; the question was, where the old man was hiding." And then my father told me a long story which I will not here set down, because it hath no real bearing on my history.

"You have disappointed me greatly," he went on presently. "You had a chance such as few men have, and you spoiled it; you have gained the king's enmity, and you have allowed yourself to be mewed up here in this stinking hole with a lot of psalm-singing Nonconformists. Besides, you have done no good by it all. The story hath come out, and the king hath taken an oath that he did never wed Lucy. Therefore your knowledge doth avail nothing."

"But I saw the contract," I cried.

"Ay, but the king hath taken his oath," he laughed.

"What, to a lie!" I said.

"The oath of Charles Stuart!" said my father. "What was his father's oath worth? What is the son's oath worth? But you have spoiled your chance. What

matters whether the thing is a forgery or no? Now that the thing hath come to light it doth not matter. That is what angers me. The son in whom I trusted to have clever wits hath acted like a Puritan."

"And am I to remain in gaol?" I asked.

"As to that, no," he replied. "Now that the thing hath come to light nought matters. Had I come back earlier I had set you at liberty long ago. As soon as I discovered how matters stood I took steps to gain your freedom."

"Then I may leave this place?" I cried.

"Ay, be thankful that your father is not a fool. You can e'en return to your old home to-morrow."

"And know you aught of Mistress Constance Leslie?" I asked.

"Ay, I do," he replied.

"What? Tell me!" I cried.

My father turned and looked around him before speaking, as though he feared some one was listening.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW I LEFT FLEET PRISON

"TELL me all you know concerning her," he said. I told him quickly, feverishly, for I was eager to hear what he knew. I noticed, however, that he paid but little heed to our meeting near Folkestone, nor to my account of my journey to Bedford to set her at liberty. But when I described our meeting with the king he was all attention.

"The blackguard," he said presently, between his teeth.

"Who?" I asked.

"Charles Stuart," he said; "but pay no heed to me. After all, the king is king."

"But where is Constance now?" I asked. "I have been told that her father was hanged at Tyburn. Where is she?"

"What is she to you?" asked my father.

"She is everything to me," I replied.

"You fancy you are in love with her?"

I did not reply, for my father spoke, I thought, scornfully.

"I will admit that the maid is a brave maid. It is not often one hears of such daring, such resolution," he said presently.

"Ay," I replied, my heart all aglow. "She took her sister's guilt upon her own shoulders. For months she defied all pursuers, and when at last she stood before the king, she refused to do his bidding, refused to betray her sister's hiding-place. But what happened to her afterwards? Tell me, father, for pity's sake."

"You do not know? You have heard of nought that took place after the night when you behaved like a fool before the king, and were sent hither?"

"I have heard nothing."

"It was the best joke I have heard of for years," laughed my father. "Verily I believe it was that which made Charles hang old John Leslie. He hath let more guilty men go free; besides, Sir John was a harmless old fool, with nought against him save that he was over-religious."

"But tell me, father; tell me," I pleaded.

"Well," said my father, "no sooner did she leave his Majesty's presence than it seems that she began to look around for a means of escape. It seems also that during the time she appeared before the king, half-a-dozen young gallants lost their hearts over her, and she being a quick-witted maid singled out the biggest fool of the whole batch. I suppose that during her midnight audience with the king these young fools waited around the corridors in the hope of having speech with her. How she did it I don't know; but she managed to gain audience with the young fool I have mentioned, and in five minutes he became wax in her hands. She persuaded him to bring her the gay and full outfit of a young Court gallant, and offered to run away with him."

"And then?" I cried, for my father stopped in the middle of his recital to laugh, as though he were telling a good joke.

"Then the next night, while the king was at supper, she managed to escape with this silly loon. It seems that they went away under the trees, both of them dressed like gay cavaliers, until they came to a spot where two horses were waiting for them. Then they both mounted, the maid I

am told having the firmer seat of the two, and galloped away together. By this time night had come on, and then before this addlepate, Charles Fitzroy by name, knew where he was, he found himself alone. The girl had galloped away with his horse, and his fine attire, leaving him to get out of his scrape as best he could."

Again my father stopped to laugh.

"But how do you know the truth of this?" I cried.

"Oh, it was easy to know," replied my father. "Young Master Fitzroy rode around through the night, calling vainly for his lady-love until daylight, and presently happened upon another love-sick swain who had also been away love-making. Master Fitzroy was so overcome with grief that he actually told the other all that had happened."

"But was he not punished by the king?"

"As to that," replied my father, "he knew enough not to return to brave the king's anger. He ran away to Holland, and the king having been much beholden to Fitzroy's father hath not sent after him. Nevertheless, Charles was very angry. He was much struck with the maid's beauty; moreover, from what I can hear, his discomfiture hath been much laughed at by the wits of the town. Oh, the maid was clever, there can be no doubt of that, and verily she hath made me believe, almost in spite of myself, in the virtue of women."

"But you said you know where she is now," I said, for although my heart rejoiced at what I had heard, I longed much to know how she fared after these long weary months of my imprisonment.

"Did I say that?" said my father. "Then I said too much; but methinks I may be able to tell you that which may set you thinking."

"What?" I cried feverishly.

"As you know," went on my father, "the bishops and clergy of the Episcopal Church have prevailed on the king to pass stringent laws concerning these prating Puritans. In truth these men of God have so hedged them around, that a Nonconformist is nearly as badly placed as were Protestants during the reign of Mary. They are not allowed to preach, or to pray, except according to the bishops' will. In fact they are hardly able to live at all, for they be hunted

like foxes and rats from one place to another. It is true they ought to subscribe to the Prayer-book, and take all the oaths which the king prescribes, but you see they will not. Thus they are fined and imprisoned by the hundreds."

"I have heard this," I cried; "but what hath it to do with the whereabouts of Constance?"

"I am coming to that," replied my father; "and the less you interrupt me the sooner you will know all I have to tell. As a consequence of these laws, there be hundreds of families without homes or friends, whom God must indeed pity. They have no shelter but the hedgeside; no food but what is free to the rabbits and the fowls of the air. Many of them were parish ministers, and since the Act of Uniformity and the other Acts their condition hath been piteous. Of course they be fools, for why cannot they swallow their scruples and be done with it? But they will not. The clergy refuse to be episcopally ordained, and they will continue to preach, and hence the trouble. Well, it seems that a Master Leslie, who was own cousin to Sir John, was one of these Presbyterian or Independent ministers who refused to be ordained by a bishop, and thus he was cast into the lanes, with a wife and six children. For a long time I suppose he had no shelter but the hedges, for the farmers were afraid even to give them a hiding place in their barns. At length, however, a farmer was brave enough to give them shelter in an outhouse; at any rate, he did not inform the vicar or the magistrates about them. Some say he even brought them food, but concerning that I have no certain knowledge. About a fortnight ago, however, the magistrates heard of them, and sent the constables to take them, on what pretext I don't know. It seems that just as the constables were entering the barn they saw a woman come out, and one of them swears it was Mistress Constance Leslie."

"Where was this?" I cried.

"At a parish about three miles from Bedford; I have forgotten the name."

"And how long ago?"

"I have just told you; it was about a fortnight ago."

"And was the constable sure it was she?"

"He can take his oath to it, he saith; he also rushed

after her to take her, but she escaped in the darkness. Some say she tripped the constable up, and blew out the candle in his lantern. However, it may be all a mistake, especially as since that time the whole district hath been searched, and nought hath come of it. Especially hath search been made at Goodlands, the place which belonged to Sir John Leslie, but not a sight of her hath there been."

"And what hath become of Goodlands?" I asked, with a fast beating heart.

"Oh, it still appertaineth to the Leslies. It seems that the king is still determined to capture the pretty Constance, and so he hath done nought by Sir John's estates except to appropriate the rents. He believes that sooner or later the daughters will claim their property, and by this means he will be able to lay hands upon them. I am told that at present one of Leslie's farmers lives in the house."

I did not speak concerning this, nevertheless my heart beat high with hope. I had heard Constance say that when she was once in her father's house at Goodlands she had no fear of searchers. Was it not possible that she had escaped thither, and was still in hiding? I knew that her heart would go out in sympathy with the distressed clergyman who had been driven from his parish, and his vicarage, and that she would seek to bring him food and comfort. What more likely then than my father's story was true. But as I have said I was silent, for I knew that he would not be likely to think of her as I did.

"That is all there is to tell," he said presently, and I saw that his eyes rested searchingly on me, as though he would read the thoughts in my mind.

"What are you going to do?" he continued at length.

"I am going to find her," I said.

"And then?"

"I do not know," I replied, for although I was sure I had seen the light of love in her eyes that night when we stood in the presence of the king, I was afraid she had forgotten all about me during the long weary months I had been lying in prison.

"But what would you?" he asked.

"I would wed her," I replied.

"What, wed the daughter of a regicide!" he cried.

"Wed a woman with a price set upon her head! Destroy all your chances in life, and that for no benefit to you save to satisfy a mad fancy!"

"What would you do if you were in my place, father?" I asked. "If Constance were my mother and you were my age, what would you do?"

For a moment my father's lips quivered, and then I knew that although he had become more cynical than of old, his heart was still warm towards the memory of my mother, and towards me his only son.

"But can you do aught? I tell you it is only through the influence of the king's brother that I have obtained your liberty. If his Majesty discovers that you have in aught tried to help this woman he will have no mercy. Doubtless he is easygoing as far as the State is concerned; for that matter his best friends see that he is ruining the country over which he pretends to reign. But he is bitter in his private hatreds. See how he hath treated those who had aught to do with his father's death. Not one shred of mercy hath he shown. All are hanged, or imprisoned, save those who have escaped across the sea. You, Roland, have thwarted his will, and he believes that it is because this maid cares for you, that she fled from Windsor that night. I tell you he will have no mercy, and even although I have found the weak side of Duke James of York, I could do nothing for you."

"Still I must find her if I can."

"But you can do no good. If she hath a hiding-place you will only endanger her by trying to find her."

"No; I will not endanger her," I cried. "Besides, I know not what she may be suffering; I do not know what difficulty she hath in evading those who would place her under the king's power."

"You know her hiding-place?" said my father.

"No, I do not know it," I replied; "I can only guess."

"I tell you Goodlands is watched closely, and the whole countryside is watched. If she is anywhere in the district then——," and my father shrugged his shoulders, French fashion, as he ceased to speak.

"Then she needs me all the more."

"Oh, you fool, you fool!" said my father, and yet I thought his voice was kind and caressing.

"Look here," he went on presently. "I have influence with Duke James of York, who I verily believe will soon be king. Charles will not live to be an old man. He cannot, No man can live long who spends his days and nights as he doth. And let me tell you this: Duke James doth not think unkindly of you, if Charles doth. Even now I can put you into the way of advancement, for Duke James hath much power. If you give up all thoughts of this woman I can even yet promise you a career. The duke thought you a dashing youth with a ready wit and a strong arm. But if you do what is in your heart to do, I can see nothing for you but the prison or the gallows."

"Neither," I cried boldly, for what he had said had made me brave and hopeful.

"What then?"

"I know not. But I will go and help the woman I love. If she will wed me, no man in England will be so happy as I."

"How will you live?" said my father with a sneer.

"I will escape to New England, even as some of our forefathers did," I cried. "Some of her forefathers are also there."

"And if you did this what would you do?"

"I am not a fool, even although you say I am," I cried. "I am young, and at her side I shall be strong. Men no better than I have had a career in other lands, and I will be in no whit behind them."

My father smiled sadly. "Well, come with me to the old home, and then we can think of these things together," he said presently.

"If mother were where Constance is, what would you do?" I asked again.

He was silent for a time, then he said quietly—

"You will be able to walk out of here to-morrow a free man. I have seen to that. It is not far from here to the *Virgin Queen*, where our old servant Caleb Bullen lives. Caleb will expect you, and you may find out when you get there what I would have you do."

When I left the prison on the following morning I heard

the Nonconformists comforting each other by singing hymns, and by prayers, so that while I could not understand many of their scruples my heart went out to them in sympathy. I noticed, too, that my gaolers paid me much respect as I left, and I judged that my father had somehow made them think of me as different from those whom they usually guarded.

As I walked up Ludgate Hill towards St. Paul's Cross no one paid heed to me, and yet as I caught sight of myself in one of the windows as I passed by, I scarce knew myself, for I had grown a beard several inches long, while my face was as pale as the face of a dead man.

When I entered the *Virgin Queen* old Caleb Bullen started back like a man frightened.

"Great Lord! Is that you, Master Roland?" he cried. "If it had been night I should e'en have taken you for a ghost."

"If you will give me some breakfast, I will prove to you that I am no ghost, Caleb," I replied.

"Ay, but that hath been ready this last half-hour, Master Roland," he replied. "Your father gave orders concerning it last night. In truth, so particular was he about it, that I cut a new ham, the very best I have, and six eggs have I had fried for you. But come this way, Master Roland," and he led me into the room I had occupied long months before.

"My father," I said, to Caleb, "is he here?"

"Not one word will I speak about him till you have had something to eat," said Caleb. "Faith, Master Roland, but it makes my flesh creep to see you. No, no, I will speak no word, not one word until you have eaten half a pound of ham. It was a good pig, Master Roland, twenty score weight, and fed on good barley."

In truth, although I was anxious to know what my father had said to him, the smell of the ham was so appetising that I fell to eating without further parley, while Caleb stood by watching me as though he was deriving great comfort by doing so.

"It does me good to see you, Master Roland," he said presently. "Why you are looking better already. Another rasher now, Master Roland, just one more rasher."

"Not another particle, Caleb," I said with a laugh, for a hearty meal had made me feel a new man. "Now tell me, is my father here?"

"No, Master Roland."

"Where is he? Do you know?"

"No, I do not know, but he left this for you," and he brought a bag and placed it on the table before me.

I heard the jingle of money, and on opening the bag I found a large number of gold pieces. As I judged, there must have been a hundred pounds. But it was not of this that I paid so much heed. Besides the gold pieces I found a letter, and this was what my father had written:

"God bless you, my son—my only son. I do not think you have disappointed me much, though for a time I was sorely angered. After all, a youth cannot help loving at some time, and if the woman he loves be good and true, his love should not be laughed at. In my young days we said that the more danger there is in the rescue, the more was the rescue worthy of a brave man. I grieve much that we cannot spend some days together in the old home, but that I must leave to you. Black Ben is in the stable of the *Virgin Queen*. I knew you would like to have him, so I obtained him, although with difficulty. In this bag are a hundred pounds; you may need them. Rest a day and a night before you begin to do what is in your heart. You will need all your strength. I can do nought for you, but your mother would, I know, have you do what is in your heart. So would I. If you succeed, and have need to come to the old home, see that you take many precautions. But whatever may happen, be sure that your father loves you."

My eyes were full of tears when I finished reading this, and I knew then that although he often spoke words which seemed hard and bitter, his heart was full of love towards me.

I rushed out to the stable, where Black Ben welcomed me with a whinney. In truth, I thought he trembled with joy as he saw me.

"I have more work for you, my beauty!" I said, whereupon he rubbed his nose against my arm.

"Great God, help me!" I prayed, as I thought of what lay before me; and into my heart came a great resolution

to do what was in my heart to do. I longed much to start on my journey that day, but I was too weak. Nevertheless, at an early hour next morning, I rode through Barnet on my way to Bedford.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE BEDFORD ROAD

I COULD scarce believe after I passed through Barnet that it was indeed I, Roland Rashcliffe, who bestrode Black Ben. All the long weary months which had passed since last I had ridden along that road seemed like a painful dream.

Still, I was neither dismayed nor cast down. I knew my strength would soon come back to me, for every breath I drew was the breath of liberty and hope. I bestrode Black Ben, surely the best horse ever a man rode. At my side hung a good blade, my pistols were ready to hand, and I possessed enough money for my needs. I had also obtained new clothes according to the fashion of the times. I again presented a brave appearance.

I was told the footpads beset the road to the north, but no man molested me.

Towards evening on the second day of my journey I drew near to Bedford, when I set myself to thinking seriously what I should do. I knew that in less than an hour I should see the river coil its way through the town, seeing I was but five miles away. I could not ride fast, for my day's journey had wearied me, and so allowed Black Ben to amble along at will.

All my weariness and fatigue had gone as I rode into Bedford. I was afraid of nothing, for I believed that God had led me hither.

I did not think it best to go to *The Bull* at Bedford, but seeing an inn called *General Fairfax*, I made my way thither. If an innkeeper was bold enough to keep an inn bearing such a name, I reflected, it might be that I should be safer there than elsewhere. Not that I feared recognition. As Caleb Bullen had said, my appearance had been so changed during my prison life that scarce any one would know me. When I was in Bedford last, I was brown and strong; now

I was pale, and looked weak and ill. Moreover, my clothes were so different from what I wore then that they altered my appearance much. Besides, I had but little to fear. No warrant was out against me, neither had I done anything to cause those in authority to take note of me.

The inn, moreover, was of a quieter order than the others, neither were any troublesome questions asked of me.

After supper I found my way into the room where several men sat with their mugs of ale before them, and I found that they were talking about the trial which was to take place on the following morning.

"How many are to be tried?" asked one. "Know you, James Bilsom?"

"Ay, I think there be a score or more."

"They will be all sent to prison, I'll wage."

"There can be no doubt about that. Parson Gilloch is most terrible and bitter against these Dissenters; as for Squire Graystone, he fair hates them. Not that I can see they have done aught wrong. They do but pray and preach as they did before the coming of the king. As for their piety—well, if I lay a-dying I'd rather have one of them to pray with me than I'd have the parson, for all his long white gown."

"But still, the king is king, and law is law."

"Ay, I suppose so. Still, although I was no lover of Old Nol, we were better off in his days. There was less thieving, less drinking, less loose living, and more piety. Of that I am free to confess."

"Say not so too loud, for if Parson Gilloch hears of it he will e'en make you smart. Why, think of what hath befallen the Dissenters."

"Ay, a man can hardly call his soul his own, that he cannot. Are you going to the trial to-morrow?"

"Nay, I cannot sleep after I have been to these trials. I cannot help thinking of the women and children. It is terrible hard for them."

"Ay, it is; how they manage to live I know not."

"Think you there is any truth in the stories about Sir John Leslie's daughter?"

"Nay, I think not. If there were she'd have been found before this."

"I don't know. She's a clever maid. Why think how she guarded her sister, and got her out of the country. I do hear she's joined Sir Charles in Holland."

"Ay, but she can't be in these parts now. How can she be? Every house is watched; besides, how can she get meat to eat?"

"I don't know; but I tell you, she hath all her wits, and she's more than a match for Parson Gilloch. Peter Blewitt swears it was she that he saw before she tripped him up and blew out his candle."

After this they talked much in this fashion, but they said nought that gave me any clue to the secret of her hiding place, although they gave me much food for reflection.

The next morning I made my way to the Chapel of Herne, in the hopes that I might hear something which might help me in the work I had set myself to do.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PURITAN'S COTTAGE

"THE court house is not so full to-day."

"Nay. Do you mind when John Bunyan was tried? Ay, but he answered the justices boldly, and so cleverly that they could not gainsay him."

"True, but they clapped him into gaol for all that."

"Ay, they did; but that did not depend upon the trial. They had made up their minds to do that before he was brought hither. John was among the first, and people thought much of the trials then. We have had so many since that we be getting used to them."

"Well, it makes it pay to be religious."

"Nay, say rather it makes it a paying business to go to church. There's nought of religion in sending godly people to prison for praying in their own way."

"Hush, man! Men be spying around everywhere, and it takes but little to get fined. I hear there is a lot of paid spies, whose business it is to go around to hear folks talk and to give information to the justices."

"I suppose so. And yet these Dissenters pray and preach more than ever. I am told that they be increasing in number every week."

"And yet I hear that the king and the clergy say they'll never stop until there's not a Dissenter left in the land."

"Ay, I suppose so."

All this and much more I heard as I stood in the Chapel of Herne that March morning, for although it was wellnigh ten o'clock as I entered the building, the justices did not come until late. The reason for this was, that although only the petty sessions were to be held that day, so great was the interest taken in the Nonconformists that both Sir Henry Chester, of Tilsworth, and Sir George Blundell, of Cardington Manor, had declared their intention of being present. I heard, moreover, that both these worshipful gentlemen were very bitter against the Dissenters, and that Sir George Blundell had said that he would "sell a cow for a shilling" rather than the work against them should not go forward. It was also said that when Sir Matthew Hale visited Bedford, he would have set John Bunyan at liberty but for Sir Henry Chester, who declared that Bunyan was a good-for-nothing fellow who preferred going around stirring up dissension to working at his proper trade, which was that of a travelling tinker.

It was because they were late that proceedings did not begin at the proper hour that morning. When they arrived near noon-day, however, their entrance made a great stir, and they took their seats on the bench with a great show of importance.

I stayed only during the trial of one who was brought thither that morning, but I was told that the other cases were dismissed with great speed, as the justices had some appointment elsewhere which they wished to keep. The man who was tried while I was there was called James Ireton, whose name, I was told, went much against him, seeing that Colonel Ireton had been hanged by the king only a little time before.

He was only a young man, it may be of twenty-five years of age, and looked a harmless sort of fellow, although I saw by the look of quiet determination in his eyes that he was not one who would be easily turned aside from his purposes. He was a blacksmith by trade, and one, I judged, of tremendous strength of arm and body. The indictment brought against him was in these words:

"James Ireton, you are accused of devilishly and maliciously abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and for being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings and conventicles, to the great disturbance and distraction of the good subjects of this kingdom, and contrary to the laws of our sovereign lord the king."

The man replied that he did indeed attend a meeting of godly people for praise and prayer, but that it was held in an outhouse nearly half a mile from the king's highway, and that there was not a dwelling-house near it.

"But do you know that such a meeting is unlawful?" asked the magistrate.

"I find nothing in the Word of God against it," replied the man.

"I do not mean the Word of God, of which you are ignorant," replied the magistrate, "but the laws of this country."

"I always put the laws of God above every law," replied the blacksmith, "and there I do find I am commanded to continue in prayer."

"Ay, and the law hath provided the church for you to pray. Do you go to church?"

"Ay, I do go to the Church of God," replied the man.

"What church?"

"A church composed of those who meet together in Christ's name," replied he.

"Ah, some conventicle! That is no church. How can you call that a church?"

"I have Christ's own words," replied the man. "He said, 'Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them,' and it is Christ that makes the church."

"I cannot allow this blasphemy," said the justice. "The question is, do you go to the parish church?"

"No," replied Ireton, "I do not."

"And why?"

"Because I do not find the Scriptures faithfully proclaimed, because many Romish practices are performed, and because I get no good to my soul."

"Thou art a naughty, law-breaking varlet!" said the justice.

"Nay, that is not so. In truth there was a time when

this was true of me; for I was a drunkard, and I treate my wife with great cruelty. For this I was not punished but now that I am trying to obey God's word and to lea others to holy life, I am e'en haled before you."

"But dids't thou go to church when thou wert what tho sayest?"

"Ay, that I did. I was one of the bell-ringers at th parish church."

"Well now, wilt thou not promise to be a decent fello again? A man who can ring one of a peal of bells is useful man, and no man can say to the contrary. Now why not be as you were before? I don't mean as to th wife-beating, that is, of course, wrong. But can't you b religious in the right way, go to church regularly, and drin your ale in moderation?"

"Why," said the man, "I knew nought about religio till I heard John Bunyan preach; then I realized that had been a sinner, and that I must repent of my sins, an accept Christ as my Saviour. On doing this such a jo and peace came into my heart, that I longed to tell othe of the good news which had come to me."

"Ay, but how can an ignorant man like thee be fit t preach?"

"I have often thought of that myself, and truly I hav tried not to. But I have felt what I think the Apostl must have felt when he said, 'Woe is me if I preach not th Gospel.' Besides, God hath blessed me wonderfully, an hath used me in leading many to conversion."

After this many other questions were asked, which th man answered in a like fashion.

"Now," said Sir Henry Chester presently, "it hath bee proved that thou hast been a naughty, law-breaking varle Thou hast devilishly and perniciously abstained from com ing to church, and thou hast been guilty of the sin of preach ing. For either of these things thou dost deserve to b punished with great severity. But we are inclined to b merciful. If thou wilt promise to go to church as the la pictates, and never to preach again, thou shalt be forgive Come now, that is a great mercy."

"Nay," said the man. "I cannot promise, for I must e'en obey God rather than man."

After this he was threatened with many cruel threats, ut being obstinate he was committed to gaol as though he ere an ordinary felon. No sooner was the man dragged way by the constables than I left the court house, partly ecause I did not see how I could make any discoveries s to the whereabouts of Constance while there, and econdly, because I thought I saw some of the magistrates asting suspicious eyes upon me.

During the rest of the day I cast my mind about as to hat I should do. I discovered that the constables were n the look-out for Constance, and that the whole country-ide was being watched, so that if she in any way showed erself, she should be arrested and thrown into prison. But in this matter many opinions were afloat. Some had t that she had never returned to Bedford at all, but had scaped to Holland directly after her father's death, whither er sister Dorcas had gone. Others, again, held with Peter Blewitt the constable, that it was she who helped many of he Dissenters in their trouble, and, indeed, kept them from tarving. This, however, seemed impossible, for how could he, who must keep in constant hiding, be able to help others?

As far as I could judge, no man seemed to recognize me. My long imprisonment had much changed my appearance, while my beard acted almost like a mask. In order to est this, I even went so far as to have a chat with the land-ord of *The Bull*, and so little was he aware as to who I was hat I laughed at the fears I had about the magistrates eyeing me with suspicion.

I dared not go to Goodlands, however. I knew that the place was being watched, and thus, if Constance were there —as, remembering what she had told me long months before, I believed she was—I should only increase her danger. And yet I longed to see her more than words could say, for my ong imprisonment had not lessened my love. It had ncreased it. So that the thought that she was only a few miles from me tempted me to discard all prudence, and boldly seek her out. But this I did not do, for true love doth not seek its own pleasure, but the welfare of the one who is beloved. Nevertheless I was too restless to stay within doors, and leaving the town plunged into one of the dark country roads beyond it.

It must have been nine by the clock when I reached
ancient stile which for no particular reason I crossed, a
although it was dark, I had but little difficulty in followi
the path beyond. In truth it seemed like a much trodd
road, and one on which many people had lately passed.
had not gone far before I saw a tiny twinkling light, aft
which I heard the sound of voices singing.

A few minutes later I was so close that I could hear wh
they were singing. I did not think that the voices we
very musical; nevertheless, there was a plaintiveness
tone mingled with triumph that I could not help bei
moved.

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall
fear?*

*"The Lord is the strength of my life: of whom shall I
afraid?*

*"When evildoers come upon me to eat up my flesh, ev
mine adversaries and my foes, they stumbled and fell.*

*"Though an host should encamp against me, my heart sh
not fear.*

*"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek aft
"That I may dwell in the House of the Lord all the days
my life."*

After this I heard the voice of the minister who I learn
later was John Day who had been the minister of the pari
church of St. Martin's.

"My friends," he said. "I feel constrained to speak
few words of comfort and hope to you, for truly the Lo
hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad; b
before I try to expound God's holy word, let us ask Him f
wisdom and light, so that I may speak His words wi
wisdom, rightly dividing the word of truth."

"It will be well that one of us do go out and watch
said a voice, "for the magistrates be very bitter against
John Ireton and many others have been sent to gaol to-da
and I do hear that orders have been given to watch so
of us, and especial mention hath been made of you, Mast
Day.'"

"I do not fear," said the old clergyman; "the Lord ha
called me to preach the Gospel, and I may not hold m
peace. Still, seeing we live in evil times, it may be as y

ay, therefore do one of you watch while we seek to eat of
ne Bread of life."

I had come up to the cottage unheeded by the wor-
ippers. As far as I could gather there were not a dozen
. all, who were evidently labouring men and their wives.
tanding where I was, however, I could see the cottage
lainly, and I noticed that one of their number went out,
nd stood at a place where he could take note of any that
ight come.

After Master John Day had prayed, he began to speak
) the people. First of all he expounded the Scriptures to
iem, and then he sought to enforce his teaching concerning
od's providence by example. "You know, my friends,"
e said, "how I have been put to great straits for bread.
ou have helped me all you could; but you have had
arely enough for your own necessities. I have tried to
otain service at the hands of those who employ labour,
it few would hire me. In truth, I should have starved,
it for one dear friend who shall be nameless. Then the
me came when even she was powerless, and yesterday I
id my little ones would have starved had not the Lord
nt a stranger along the road, who hath given us enough
r our necessities for several days. Shall we doubt the
ord, dear friends? It is true we have been driven from
ir home, and we have even been forbidden to take religious
ercises together, yet hath the Lord watched over us, ay,
nd He will watch over us, even to the last."

He had scarcely said these words than the man who had
een appointed as a watcher rushed in.

"The constables!" he cried; "they will be here in a
inute more."

"Shall we stay and meet them boldly?" said Master
ohn Day.

"What good will it do?" one cried. "I know that the
uakers take no note of them, but we be wiser than they.
'e must e'en disband."

"Nay, but I will gladly suffer for Christ's sake," said
ohn Day. "Still, I must remember my wife, and my dear
ttle ones."

Upon this the light was extinguished, and a few seconds
ter I heard hurrying footsteps.

I waited hidden behind a thick bush, and presently heard stealthy footsteps approaching.

"All is dark," said a voice.

"Ay, but they have been here."

"Yes, but they are gone. Let us go in and see if Mas Day is there."

"That will be no use. If we go in it will make th more watchful against another time."

"Perhaps that is so. We have missed them this tin but we will pounce upon them unawares another tin You know that Parson Gilloch told us we should have crown apiece and a gallon of strong ale if we caught Mas Day in the act of preaching."

"Ay, that is so. Well, we had better go for the nigh

I heard them creep away as they had come, a in a few more minutes all was still. The worshippers h evidently gone to their homes, and not a sound could hear disturbing the stillness of the night.

Still I waited. I felt that here was my opportunity finding out the truth concerning the whereabouts Constance, and I determined to remain where I was un the minister's fears were stilled, after which I would t and have speech with him.

After a time a light twinkled in the cottage again, a I heard the low murmur of voices. The night had beco perfectly still, and not a breath of wind moved the ba tree branches. I thought I smelt the breath of spring the air, the thought of which gave me joy, I knew not wh

"She cannot be coming here to-night," I thought. " is now wellnigh midnight, and this place must be at le three miles from Goodlands, even although there be short cut across the fields." This thought made my he cold, and yet I stayed there in hope, my eyes hungeri for a sight of her face. How long I stayed I know not, b presently I thought the voices grew louder, whereupo crept silently forward, until I could hear more plain

"It is because of the goodness of God that you have co to me, my child," the old clergyman said, "and we tha you beyond all telling. Yet do I wish you had not con The way is long to your hiding place, and the night is da

My heart almost stood still! It was the voice of C

stance which I heard, and in an instant it seemed to me as though my full strength had come back again. My weakness I felt not, and my weariness had passed away, even as snow ceases to be when the hot sun shines.

Without ado I opened the door, and stood before them. At first I thought she looked afraid, and this made me say what I should not have dared to say otherwise.

"Constance," I said, "I could not come before, but I have loved you all the time, even as I told you I should."

Her eyes were lifted to mine, as if in great wonder, then I saw the tears well up in them; but they were not tears of sorrow.

"You are not angry with me, are you?" I said.

And then she burst out sobbing upon my shoulder, while I, unheeding Master Day and his wife, strained her to my heart.

We did not stay long at the cottage. I gave Master Day enough money to meet his needs for some time to come, and then Constance and I walked to Goodlands together along the silent, lonely road whither she had come.

I will not write of all the things we spoke about during that long journey. Enough to say that she had escaped from the king's palace as my father had told me, and had made her way to Goodlands, which she entered by a secret way, known only to herself, and to the faithful farmer who occupied the kitchen part of the house and looked after the Goodlands estate. Here she was able to remain unmolested. The entrance to the house, she told me, was by a secret underground passage, the opening of which could only be discovered with great difficulty. Here, moreover, were rooms in which her forefathers had been hidden in the days of Queen Mary, the secret of which had defied all searchers. It was here she had hidden Father Solomon, whose real name was John Walters, and her sister Dorcas, and it was from here she had sent her sister to Holland to meet her husband.

She told me, moreover, that this old man, who claimed to be the father of Lucy Walters, had been driven wellnigh mad because of his daughter's shame, and that he had left his wife because she encouraged her child in her evil ways. He had, moreover, become friendly with Sir Charles Den-

man, who had given him the right to live in the lonel house. For years he had been a student of the occu sciences, in order, he said, to find out the hiding place the marriage contract between his daughter and the kin and it was here that her sister came, after she, in a fit religious frenzy, had sought to take the life of General Monk

Constance told me, moreover, that she had been taugh to fear this old man; yet did she visit him for her sister sake, on the night when we first met. Whether th marriage contract was genuine, or whether it had bee forged by the old man or no, she could not tell, neither di she know where he was now. Directly after her sister ha escaped to Holland, he also had disappeared; but befor he went he declared that he would yet see his daughte owned as the king's wife, while her son should be king England.

But it was not these things which troubled me as walked by Constance's side that dark night in March. was thinking rather of my great love for her, and how could take her from the hands of her enemies. For sh was now all alone in the world. Her father was dead hanged by the king, while her sister had rejoined her hus band, a man whom Constance regarded with fear and anger

Although she had stayed long at Goodlands, she fel that her stay there must soon come to an end. She coul not live much longer under such circumstances, especiall as she felt sure that she was suspected of being hidden i the house.

Of the love we confessed one to another I will not write for that is not the affair of those who may read this; bu that she did love me I did not doubt. How could I doub it when for me she had defied the king? How could I doub after the way she had sobbed out her love for me in Maste John Day's cottage?

Thus it was that the long walk was to me a joy beyond words. At last my love was by my side, and so I did no dread the dark clouds that hung in our sky, I did not fea the enemies which beset her on every hand.

"There is nought for us to fear," I said to her, for at tha moment everything seemed possible to me.

"Oh, I have prayed for this so long, so earnestly," she

said. "That night when we stood before the king, I wanted to tell you what was in my heart, but—but—" and then she told me again what my heart was hungering to hear.

"We cannot stay in England," I said, "but we can go across the seas, and make a home in New England, even as your Puritan forefathers did. Will you, Constance?"

"Whither thou goest, I will go," she said; "where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

Then I thanked God with a full heart for all His great goodness to me, and there and then we arranged that I should come for her the following night, and that we should ride together to my father's house before setting out to find a new home.

"Good-night, my beloved," I said as we parted; "we will trust, and not be afraid."

"Come as early as you dare," she said shyly, "for in truth I feel I can no longer live without you."

And this I promised with a right good will and with a light heart, for I did not then know what would soon be revealed to me.

CHAPTER XXIX

HOW I LEFT MY OLD HOME

EXCITED as I was, I found my way back to the inn and slept like a child. No ill dreams disturbed my rest, nor did a shadow of fear enter my heart. When I awoke next day the clouds had rolled away, the sun shone in a clear sky, and there was indeed a smell of spring in the air. In truth, throughout the whole day I kept indoors, not showing myself to any man, and simply telling mine host that I must leave him that night at eight o'clock, in order to do business elsewhere. I had no need to seek a steed for Constance, for the old farmer who lived at Goodlands was able to obtain one, so I e'en sat in the inn dreaming of the glad time to come when my love and I would ride side by side towards my father's house.

When night came on, however, that happened which caused me to go into the town, and it was well I did so, else had all things happened different to me. Not that

I meant to leave the place until I mounted Black Ben to ride to Goodlands, but as I looked out of the window I saw Peter Blewitt hurrying by with an eager look in his eyes as though he were bent on a matter of importance.

"Ah, whither go you, Peter?" I heard mine host say.

"That is my business, Jonathan Coad," was the reply.

"Thy business," laughed the other.

"Ay, mine, and such as I will not tell the landlord of the *General Fairfax*,"

"Ah, ah!" laughed the landlord, "as though thou ever had business in thy life. Thou could'st never catch a thief even if he took thine own horse."

"Ah, could I not?" said Peter.

"Why, no," said the landlord. "If thou could'st have caught aught, thou would'st have caught Mistress Constance Leslie. That would have meant a hundred pounds, and yet thou did'st e'en let her slip through thy fingers."

"Wait a bit!" said Peter.

"Ay, wait till doomsday, and thou will never catch her."

"Wait till to-morrow noon," said Peter, and he hurried away.

Now it was this which caused me to go out into the town and to follow Peter as closely as I could without him seeing me.

The night had now come on, perchance it was turned six o'clock, but it was not so dark but I saw Master Sturgeon coming towards the constable.

"Ah, Peter, whither goest thou?"

"To the chief constable, Master Sturgeon."

"Ah, why?"

I did not catch his answer to this; nevertheless, I knew it to be of import by the look on the gaoler's face.

"Good, Peter," I heard him say presently, "then I shall have her under lock and key again this very night and I'll warrant young Master Rashcliffe shall not get her out a second time."

"Ay, we know where she is hidden, and we must go to her without a minute's delay. I must make haste, for if news were to reach her at Goodlands, then should I lose my hundred pounds."

With this Peter hurried on, while I fled back to the inn with the speed of the wind. In less time than it takes me to tell, I had paid my count, and had saddled Black Ben, and without saying a word to mine host, I rode to Goodlands as fast as my horse could carry me.

When I reached there all was dark. Not one sound could I hear, no one could I see. I hammered again and again at the door, but no man answered, until, as I remembered how rapidly the time was flying, I was wellnigh in a frenzy.

"Come, farmer, come!" I cried; "it's a matter of life and death!" But still I got no answer, save that I thought I heard a low, mocking laugh.

I knew not what to do, for it was full two hours before I had arranged to meet Constance. Neither did I mean to go into the house at all. She had told me that her horse should be waiting at the door saddled, and that we could ride away together. But no horse was there, neither was there, as I have said, any sign of life; and when I remembered that the constables might be there at any moment, I was in danger of losing my senses.

Thus I did what under any other circumstances might have placed my life in great danger, for I called to her aloud by name, and if watchers had been near they would have known that she was there.

"Constance, my love!" I cried, "it is Roland! and then, quick as a flash of light, I felt that she was coming towards me.

"Roland, is it you?"

"Ay, it is. Quick! Quick!"

"Why, what is the matter?"

"The constables have discovered your hiding-place—they are even on the way now. Where is your horse?"

"In the stable. It will take me ten minutes to saddle him." It was the farmer who spoke.

"Then saddle him," I cried. "As for you, Constance, will you make yourself ready for the journey?"

"Ay, I have been ready for a full hour," she said, and I noticed that she wore close-fitting garments, but in the dimness of the light I could not see her as plainly as I desired.

At that moment I heard the sound of horses' hoof Evidently they had wasted not a moment in comin hither.

"It is they!" I cried "Hark! they be coming toward us!"

My love spoke not a word; but she came close to m as if to gain strength from my strength.

"We dare not wait for your horse to be brought," said.

"Tell me what to do, and I will do it," she whispere "Do not be afraid for me, Roland."

With one leap I was on Black Ben's back, and a secon later she sat before me.

"Who goes there?"

I did not speak, but touched Black Ben's side with m spur. The brave horse leaped forward and then stoppe as if held by a strong hand.

"'Tis she, 'tis she! Help! help!"

"Forward, Ben!" I said, and the horse gave a grea leap, leaving himself at liberty. But this was only for moment. Another man leaped forward, and brough the horse to his haunches.

"We've got them!" he cried. "Help! help!"

My sword hand was by this time free, and I brought m weapon down upon the man's head. The blade turned i my hand, or I must have cleaved his skull with the blov But I think he must have worn a steel cap, for although h fell, I knew I had not killed him.

"Let me guide your horse, then will your right arm b free. I know the road," cried Constance; and she took th reins, heedless of the cries we heard, and a few second later we were in a lonely lane.

"Towards London!" I said, as she hesitated which wa to turn, and then a bullet passed so close to me that e'en shaved my ear, and to this day my right ear is no perfect as my left ear is.

It was no longer a fight. It had now become a rac We had much against us, seeing we both sat on one horse but we had much for us also, seeing that Black Ben had th strength of two horses, and bore us as though we we feathers. Nevertheless, I knew we could not ride to m

ather's house in this fashion, and even then I remember vondering how I was to get a steed for my love.

I quickly discovered that there were two horses following s, but whether they gained on us I could not tell; sometimes I thought they did, and again I fancied otherwise; ut, in any case, we had happened upon a dangerous time, or more than once I heard a pistol shot, even although either of us was harmed.

"They are gaining on us," I said presently.

"But only one, Roland."

"That is true," I said with a laugh, for now that I had ny love by my side I cared not one whit for danger; neither id I feel my weakness, as I had feared I should. In truth, ny strength had come back to me wondrously.

Black Ben dashed on at a fine speed as soon as we gained ne highway, but I knew that if our pursuers were well nounted we must in time be overtaken, for I was never a ght man, and must have weighed nine score pounds even nen; while Constance, as I have before stated, was no ender slip of a maid, but well grown and finely proporoned. However good a horse may be, he cannot carry vo as easily as one, and thus, as one of our pursuers gained pon us, I had to think of what we were to do.

"I have a plan," I said presently.

"What, Roland?"

"We will presently let the man close behind us come up o us. I will unhorse him, and then you shall take his lace. There is only one thing against that."

"What is that?" she asked eagerly.

"Only that a man's saddle will be on the nag's back, and it ill look strange for a maid to be riding on a man's saddle."

I felt her laughing as I spoke, at which I wondered.

"Why do you laugh?" I asked.

"Because I am afraid I should look more strange on a oman's saddle than a man's," she replied.

At this I laughed too, for now I realized that she was essed in the attire of a gallant, the which I had not oticed at first, seeing that she wore a long cloak.

She did not seem to have a vestige of fear, and I knew y the tone of her voice that her heart was light, even in ite of all she had passed through.

Presently we came to a lonely spot, and then I allow
the man who had been shouting at us to stop to overtake u
It was but the work of a moment. The man was
swordsman, neither was he prepared for my attack.
truth, I believe he expected to find only Constance,
heedlessly did he ride up. As it was, he fell to the grou
stunned and helpless.

In less time than it takes me to tell, Constance had leap
on to the man's horse, and we were soon galloping side
side towards London.

"They cannot catch us now," she laughed.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I have the better horse. The man who ro
this left the other far behind."

After this we spoke not for some time, but rode steadily o

"You are not afraid, Constance?"

"Not with you," she replied, and my heart burned wi
joy at the sound of her voice.

Now and then as we passed into an open space I saw th
the feather of her hat waved in the wind, and that t
cloak slipped from her shoulders, revealing the gay att
she wore.

"I'faith, you make a pretty man," I said.

"Do I ride like one, Roland?"

"Ay, and you ride like one, too. In truth, so well do y
ride that I would e'en like a kiss to assure myself that th
art not some gay gallant who hath come riding with m

Again we dashed on, until when morning came we h
wellnigh reached Barnet, and here I deemed it well
turn aside and make my way through the village of Enfi
instead of keeping nearer London. Here we stopped a
breakfasted while the horses were fed and groomed.
one cast suspicious eyes upon us, for in truth Constan
might have passed as my younger brother, so bravely
she carry herself. Not even the maid of whom W
Shakespeare wrote in the play *As you Like It*, looked half
sweet and charming as she.

"I would call you Rosalind, only Will's heroine was
half so fair as thee, neither was she half as brave," I laugh
as we breakfasted together in the inn.

I saw her lip quiver at this, and the tears well up into

eyes ; and then I felt that, although she was as brave as any man—nay, braver than any man I ever knew—she was still a woman. I saw that, while she was fearless and bold in the face of danger, she became trembling and fearful now that the danger was over. Perchance, too, she remembered her father's fate, and thought of her own lonely condition. But that was only for a minute, for her eyes had neither tears nor sorrow in them as they looked up into mine and told me of her love.

By noon we had reached my father's house. I did not come in at the lodge gate, but entered by an unfrequented way. It was by a wicket gate which led through a shrubbery and up to a postern door, a door which was seldom opened in the old days when I lived at home.

My heart seemed ready to burst as I came in sight of the house, for it was now nearly two years since I had seen it ; and after all, there is no spot on earth which affects a man as much as the place where he was born and reared.

" I trust my father is at home," I said to Constance.

" Ay, he is, and here to greet thee, Roland ! "

I turned and saw my father standing by my side.

" I have been expecting thee, Roland."

I looked at him in astonishment.

" Ay, I knew what thou would'st do. Art thou not my own son ? That is why I have been waiting and watching these last twenty-four hours. But come in," and he opened the postern door. " Fasten the horses here," he said. " I will give orders concerning them."

He led the way into the room, where I had had the interview with Katharine Harcomb two years before, while I watched his face closely, wondering what he would think of Constance.

" Remove your hats and cloaks, will you ? " he said.

This we did, and I saw him looking at my love all the time.

Presently, after gazing at her steadily for some moments, his lips moved.

" I do not wonder," he said. " He could not help it. How could he help it ? Had I been the lad, I should have done just the same."

Neither of us spoke, for I do not think either of us knew what was in his mind.

"Dost thou love this boy—my boy Roland?" he aske of Constance presently.

Her face became rosy red, and her eyes gleamed brightly

"Ay, I do," she said.

"Then wilt thou kiss me, my child?"

Had it been any other man on earth I should have bee jealous, but my heart rejoiced as I saw him kiss my love for I knew what he thought of her.

After that he asked us many questions, and when w had answered them he said sadly, "I have made all pro visions."

"What provisions?" I asked.

"Even for thy wedding, and for thy departure," he sai sadly. "To-morrow morn thou shalt go to the old churc and be wedded, and then thou must e'en ride to Gravesen and take passage in the vessel there. Perchance, whe another king cometh, thou canst return again, but not unt then."

Neither of us asked him what he meant, for we knew It grieved us that we should have to leave my old home but it had to be, and yet were our hearts filled with a joy that passeth understanding.

The next night, as we sailed down the river past th Kentish coast, we stood side by side and hand in hand We were man and wife.

"Are you sad, Constance?"

"Nay, Roland. The morning will come. Nay, morning i in my heart now, but morning will also come for our country For myself I desire nought—nought, I have everything."

In truth so had I, and yet I longed to bring my wif back to the home of my boyhood.

Of how we fared in the new land I will say nothing here Neither will I tell by what means we at length returned t England again, or describe the joy of our children as the played amongst the gardens of my old home, while m father, a white-haired man, watched them tenderly. Tha is a part of another story, which, please God, I may te some day.

THE END

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